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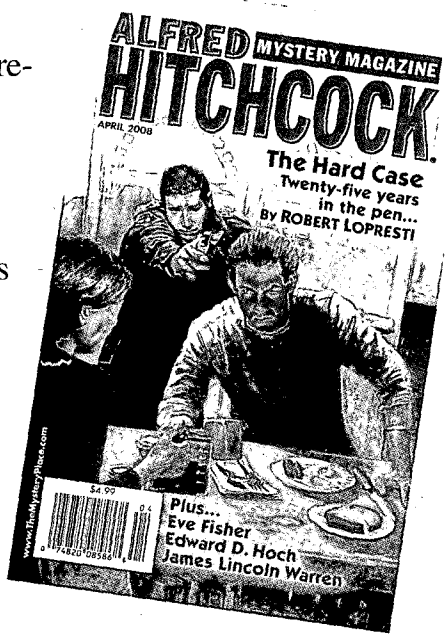

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Art by Mark Evans

KELLER THE DOGKILLER

by Lawrence Block

Keller, trying not to feel foolish, hoisted his flight bag and stepped to the curb. Two cabs darted his way, and he got into the winner, even as the runner-up filled the air with curses. "JFK," he said, and settled back in his seat.

"Which airline?"

He had to think about it. "American."

"International or domestic?"

"Domestic."

"What time's your flight?"

Usually they just took you there. Today, when he didn't have a plane to catch, he got a full-scale inquiry.

"Not to worry," he told the driver. "We've got plenty of time."

Which was just as well, because it took longer than usual to get through the tunnel, and the traffic on the Long Island Expressway was heavier than usual for that hour. He'd picked this time—early afternoon—because the traffic tended to be light, but today for some reason it wasn't. Fortunately, he reminded himself, it didn't matter. Time, for a change, was not of the essence.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked, while Keller's mind was wandering.

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"Panama," he said, without thinking.

"Then you want International, don't you?"

Why on earth had he said Panama? He'd been wondering if he should buy a straw hat, that was why. "Panama City," he corrected himself. "That's in Florida, you change planes in Miami."

"You got to fly all the way down to Miami and then back up again to Panama City? Ought to be a better way to do it."

Thousands of cab drivers in New York, and for once he had to draw one who could speak English. "Air miles," he said, in a tone that brooked no argument, and they left it at that.

Readers who enjoy this new Keller story from Lawrence Block—adapted from one of the vignettes that comprised his 2006 Keller book *Hit Parade*—won't want to miss the new novel starring the hit man, *Hit and Run*, sure to be witty, and due to be released by William Morrow in June of 2008. Also in 2008, Hard Case Crime will reissue one of Mr. Block's vintage mysteries, *A Diet of Treacle*.

At the designated terminal, Keller paid and tipped the guy, then carried his flight bag past the curbside check-in. He followed the signs down to Baggage Claim and walked around until he found a woman holding a hand-lettered sign that read "Niebauer."

She hadn't noticed him, so he took a moment to notice her, and to determine that no one else was paying any attention to either of them. She was around forty, a trimly-built woman wearing a skirt and blouse and glasses. Her brown hair was medium length, attractive if not stylish, her sharp nose contrasted with her generous mouth, and on balance he'd have to say she had a kind face. This, he knew, was no guarantee of anything. You didn't have to be kind to have a kind face.

He approached her from the side, and got within a few feet of her before she sensed his presence, turned, and stepped back, looking a little startled. "I'm Mr. Niebauer," he said.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, of course. I . . . you surprised me."

"I'm sorry."

"I had noticed you, but I didn't think . . ." She swallowed, started over. "I guess you don't look the way I expected you to look."

"Well, I'm older than I was a few hours ago."

"No, I don't mean . . . I don't know what I mean. I'm sorry. How was your flight?"

"Routine."

"I guess we have to collect your luggage."

"I just have this," he said, holding up the flight bag. "So we can go to your car."

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"We can't," she said. She managed a smile. "I don't have one, and couldn't drive it if I did. I'm a city girl, Mr. Niebauer. I never learned to drive. We'll have to take a cab."

There was a moment, of course, when Keller was sure he'd get the same cab, and he could see himself trying to field the driver's questions without alarming the woman. Instead they got into a cab driven by a jittery little man who talked on his cell phone in a language Keller couldn't recognize while his radio was tuned to a talk program in what may or may not have been the same unrecognizable language.

Keller, once again trying not to feel foolish, settled in for the drive back to Manhattan.

Two days earlier, on the wraparound porch of the big old house in White Plains, Keller hadn't felt foolish. What he'd felt was confused.

"It's in New York," he said, starting with the job's least objectionable aspect. "I live in New York. I don't work there."

"You have."

"A couple of times," he allowed, "and it worked out all right, all things considered, but that doesn't make it a good idea."

"I know," Dot said, "and I almost turned it down without consulting you. And not just because it's local."

"That's the least of it."

"Right."

"It's short money," he said. "It's ten thousand dollars. It's not exactly chump change, but it's a fraction of what I usually get."

"The danger of working for short money," she said, "is word gets around. But one thing we'd make sure of is nobody knows you're the one who took this job. So it's not a question of ten thousand dollars versus your usual fee, because your usual fee doesn't come into the picture. It's ten thousand dollars for two or three days' work, and I know you can use the work."

"And the money."

"Right. And, of course, there's no travel. Which was a minus the first time we looked at it, but in terms of time and money and all of that—"

"Suddenly it's a plus." He took a sip of his iced tea. "Look, this is stupid. We're not talking about the most important thing."

"I know."

"The, uh, subject is generally a man. Sometimes it's a woman."

"You're an equal-opportunity kind of guy, Keller."

"One time," he said, "somebody wanted me to do a kid. You remember?"

"Vividly."

"We turned them down."

"You're damn right we did."

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"Adults," he said. "Grownups. That's where we draw the line."

"Well," she said, "if it matters, the subject this time around is an adult."

"How old is he?"

"Five."

"A five-year-old adult," he said heavily.

"Do the math, Keller. He's thirty-five in dog years."

"Somebody wants to pay me ten thousand dollars to kill a dog," he said. "Why me, Dot? Why can't they call the SPCA?"

"I wondered that myself," she said. "Same token, every time we get a client who wants a spouse killed, I wonder if a divorce wouldn't be a better way to go. Why call us? Has Raoul Felder got an unlisted phone number?"

"But a dog, Dot."

She took a long look at him. "You're thinking about Nelson," she said. "Am I right or am I right?"

"You're right."

Nelson, an Australian cattle dog, had entered Keller's life in unexpected fashion, and made an equally surprising exit. He'd acquired the animal upon the death of a client, and lost it when the woman he'd hired to walk it—Andria, her name was, and she painted her toes all the colors of the rainbow—walked out of his life, and took Nelson with her.

"Keller," she said, "I met Nelson, and I liked Nelson. Nelson was a friend of mine. Keller, this dog is no Nelson."

"If you say so."

"In fact," she said, "if Nelson saw this dog and trotted over to give him a friendly sniff, that would be the end of Nelson. This dog's a pit bull, Keller, and he's enough to give the breed a bad name."

"The breed already has a bad name."

"And I can see why. If this dog was a movie actor, Keller, he'd be Jack Elam."

"I always liked Jack Elam."

"You didn't let me finish. He'd be like Jack Elam, but nasty."

"What does he do, Dot? Eat children?"

She shook her head. "If he ever bit a kid," she said, "or even snarled good and hard at one, that'd be the end of him. The law's set up to protect people from dogs. What with due process and everything, he might rip the throats out of a few tykes before the law caught up with him, but once it did he'd be out of the game and on his way to Doggie Heaven."

"Would he go to heaven? I mean, if he killed a kid—"

"All dogs go to heaven, Keller, even the bad ones. Where was I?"

"He doesn't bite children."

"Never has. Loves people, wants to make nice to everyone. If he sees another dog, however, or a cat or a ferret or a hamster, it's

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another story. He kills it."

"Oh."

"He lives with his owner in the middle of Manhattan," she said, "and she takes him to Central Park and lets him off his leash, and whenever he gets the chance he kills something. You're going to ask why somebody doesn't do something."

"Well, why don't they?"

"Because about all you can do, it turns out, is sue the owner, and about all you can collect is the replacement value of your pet, and you've got to go through the legal system to get that much. You can't have the dog put down for killing other dogs, and you can't press criminal charges against the owner. Meanwhile, you've still got the dog out there, a menace to other dogs."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Hardly anything does, Keller. Anyway, a couple of women lost their pets and they don't want to take it anymore. One had a twelve-year-old Yorkie and the other had a frisky Weimaraner pup, and neither one had a chance against Fluffy, and—"

"Fluffy?"

"I know."

"This killer pit bull is named Fluffy?"

"That's his call name. He's registered as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Keller, whom you'll recall as the author of 'Ozymandias.' I suppose they could call him Percy, or Bysshe, or even Shelley, but instead they went for Fluffy."

And Fluffy went for the Yorkie and the Weimaraner, with tragic results. As Dot explained it, this did seem like a time when one had to go outside the law to get results. But did they have to turn to a high-priced hit man? Couldn't they just do it themselves?

"You'd think so," Dot said. "But this is New York, Keller, and these are a couple of respectable middle-class women. They don't own guns. They could probably get their hands on a bread knife, but I can't see them trying to stab Fluffy, and evidently neither can they."

"Even so," he said, "how did they find their way to us?"

"Somebody knew somebody who knew somebody."

"Who knew us?"

"Not exactly. Someone's ex-husband's brother-in-law is in the garment trade, and he knows a fellow in Chicago who can get things taken care of. And this fellow in Chicago picked up the phone, and next thing you know my phone was ringing."

"And he said, 'Have you got anybody who'd like to kill a dog?'"

"I'm not sure he knows it's a dog. He gave me a number to call, and I drove twenty miles and picked up a pay phone and called it."

"And somebody answered?"

"The woman who's going to meet you at the airport."

"A woman's going to meet me? At an airport?"

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"She had somebody call Chicago," Dot said, "so I told her *I* was calling from Chicago, and she thinks you're flying in from Chicago. So she'll go to JFK to meet a flight from Chicago, and you'll show up, looking like you just walked off a plane, and she'll never guess that you're local."

"I don't have a Chicago accent."

"You don't have any kind of an accent, Keller. You could be a radio announcer."

"I could?"

"Well, it's probably a little late in life for a career change, but you could have. Look, here's the thing. Unless Fluffy gets his teeth in you, your risk here is minimal. If they catch you for killing a dog, about the worst that can happen to you is a fine. But they won't catch you, because they won't look for you, because catching a dog killer doesn't get top priority at the NYPD. But what we don't want is for the client to suspect that you're local."

"Because it could blow my cover sooner or later."

"I suppose it could," she said, "but that's the least of it. The last thing we want is people thinking a top New York hit man will kill dogs for chump change."

"The person I spoke to said there was no need for us to meet. She told me all I had to do was supply the name and address of the dog's owner, and you could take it from there. But that just didn't seem right to me. Suppose you got the wrong dog by mistake? I'd never forgive myself."

That seemed extreme to Keller. There had been a time in St. Louis when he'd gotten the wrong man, through no fault of his own, and it hadn't taken him terribly long to forgive himself. On the other hand, forgiving himself came easy to him. His, he'd come to realize, was a forgiving nature.

"Is the coffee all right, Mr. Niebauer? It feels strange calling you Mr. Niebauer, but I don't know your first name. Though come to think of it I probably don't know your last name either, because I don't suppose it's Niebauer, is it?"

"The coffee's fine," he said. "And no, my name's not Niebauer. It's not Paul, either, but you could call me that."

"Paul," she said. "I always liked that name."

Her name was Evelyn, and he'd never had strong feelings about it one way or another, but he'd have preferred not to know it, just as he'd have preferred not to be sitting in the kitchen of her West End Avenue apartment, and not to know that her husband was an attorney named George Augenblick, that they had no children, and that their eight-month-old Weimaraner had answered to the name of Rilke.

"I suppose we could have called him Rainer," she said, "but we called him Rilke." He must have looked blank, because she

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explained that they'd named him for Rainer Maria Rilke. "He had the nature of a German Romantic poet," she added, "and of course the breed is German in origin. From Weimar, as in Weimar Republic. You must think I'm silly, saying a young dog had the nature of a poet."

"Not at all."

"George thinks I'm silly. He humors me, which is good, I suppose, except he's careful to make it clear to me and everyone else that that's what he's doing. Humoring me. And I in turn pretend I don't know about his girlfriends."

"Uh," Keller said.

They'd come to her apartment because they had to talk somewhere. They'd shared long silences in the cab, interrupted briefly by observations about the weather, and her kitchen seemed a better bet than a coffee shop, or any other public place. Still, Keller wasn't crazy about the idea. If you were dealing with pros, a certain amount of client contact was just barely acceptable. With amateurs, you really wanted to keep your distance.

"If he knew about you," Evelyn said, "he'd have a fit. It's just a dog, he said. Let it go, he said. You want another dog, I'll buy you another dog. Maybe I am being silly, I don't know, but George, George just doesn't get the point."

She'd taken her glasses off while she was talking, and now she turned her eyes on him. They were a deep blue, and luminous.

"More coffee, Paul? No? Then maybe we should go look for that woman and her dog. If we can't find her, at least I can show you where they live."

"Rilke," he told Dot. "How do you like that for a coincidence? A Weimaraner and a pit bull, and they're both named after poets."

"What about the Yorkie?"

"Evelyn thinks his name was Buster. Of course, that could just be his call name, and he could have been registered as John Greenleaf Whittier."

"Evelyn," Dot said thoughtfully.

"Don't start."

"Now how do you like that for a coincidence? Because that's just what I was about to say to you."

His name aside, there was nothing remotely fluffy about Percy Bysshe Shelley. Nor did his appearance suggest an evil nature. He looked capable and confident, and so did the woman who held on to the end of his leash.

Her name, Keller had learned, was Aida Cuppering, and she was at least as striking in looks as her dog, with strong features and deeply set dark eyes and an athletic stride. She wore tight black jeans and black lace-up boots and a leather motorcycle jacket with

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a lot of metal on it, chains and studs and zippers, and she lived alone on West Eighty-seventh Street half a block from Central Park, and, according to Evelyn Augenblick, she had no visible means of support.

Keller wasn't so sure about that. It seemed to him that she had a means of support, and that it was all too visible. If she wasn't making a living as a dominatrix, she ought to make an appointment right away for vocational counseling.

There was no way to lurk outside her brownstone without looking as though he was doing precisely that, but Keller had learned that lurking wasn't required. Whenever Cuppering took Fluffy for a walk, they headed straight for the park. Keller, stationed on a park bench, could lurk to his heart's content without attracting attention.

And when the two of them appeared, it was easy enough to get up from the bench and tag along in their wake. Cuppering, with a powerful dog for a companion, was not likely to worry that someone might be following her.

The dog seemed perfectly well behaved. Keller, walking along behind the two of them, was impressed with the way Fluffy walked perfectly at heel, never straining at his leash, never lagging behind. As Evelyn had told him, the dog was unmuzzled. A muzzle would prevent Fluffy from biting anyone, human or animal, and Aida Cuppering had been advised to muzzle her dog, but it was evidently advice she was prepared to ignore. Still, three times a day she walked the animal and three times a day Keller was there to watch them, and he didn't see Fluffy so much as glower at anyone.

Suppose the dog was innocent? Suppose there was a larger picture here? Suppose, say, Evelyn Augenblick had found out that her husband had been dillydallying with Aida Cuppering. Suppose the high-powered attorney liked to lick Cuppering's boots, suppose he let her lead him around on a leash, muzzled or not. And suppose Evelyn's way of getting even was to . . .

To spend ten thousand dollars having the woman's dog killed?

Keller shook his head. This was something that needed more thought.

"Excuse me," the woman said. "Is this seat taken?"

Keller had read all he wanted to read in the *New York Times,* and now he was taking a shot at the crossword puzzle. It was a Thursday, so that made it a fairly difficult puzzle, though nowhere near as hard as the Saturday one would be. For some reason—Keller didn't know what it might be—the *Times* puzzle started out each Monday at a grade-school level, and by Saturday became damn near impossible to finish.

Keller looked up, abandoning the search for a seven-letter word

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for *Diana's nemesis,* to see a slender women in her late thirties, wearing faded jeans and a Leggs Mini-Marathon T-shirt. Beyond her, he noted a pair of unoccupied benches, and a glance to either side indicated similarly empty benches on either side of him.

"No," he said, carefully. "No, make yourself comfortable."

She sat down to his right, and he waited for her to say something, and when she didn't he returned to his crossword puzzle. Diana's nemesis. Which Diana, he wondered. The English princess? The Roman goddess of the hunt?

The woman cleared her throat, and Keller figured the puzzle was a lost cause. He kept his eyes on it, but his attention was on his companion, and he waited for her to say something. What she said, hesitantly, was that she didn't know where to begin.

"Anywhere," Keller suggested.

"All right. My name is Myra Tannen. I followed you from Evelyn's."

"You followed me . . ."

"From Evelyn's. The other day. I wanted to come along to the airport, but Evelyn insisted on going alone. I'm paying half the fee, I ought to have as much right to meet you as she has, but, well, that's Evelyn for you."

Well, Dot had said there were two women, and this one, Myra, was evidently the owner of the twelve-year-old Yorkie of whom Fluffy had made short work. It wasn't bad enough that he'd met one of his employers, but now he'd met the other. And she'd followed him from Evelyn's—followed him!—and this morning she'd come to the park and found him.

"When you followed me . . ."

"I live on the same block as Evelyn," she said. "Just two doors down, actually. I saw the two of you get out of the taxi, and I was watching when you left. And I, well, followed you."

"I see."

"I got a nice long walk out of it. I don't walk that much now that I don't have a dog to walk. But you know about that."

"Yes."

"She was the sweetest thing, my little dog. Well, never mind about that. I followed you all the way through the park and down to First Avenue and wherever it was. Forty-ninth Street? You went into a building there, and I was going to wait for you, and then I told myself I was being silly. So I got in a cab and came home."

For God's sake, he thought. This amateur, this little housewife, had followed him home. She knew where he lived.

He hesitated, looking for the right words. Would it be enough to tell her that this was no way to proceed, that contact with his clients compromised his mission? Was it in fact time to abort the whole business? If they had to give back the money, well, that was one good thing about working for chump change: a refund wasn't all that expensive.

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He said, "Look, what you have to understand . . ."

"Not now. There she is."

And there she was, all right. Aida Cuppering, dressed rather like a Doberman pinscher, all black leather and metal studs and high black lace-up boots, striding along imperiously with Fluffy, leashed, stepping along at her side. As she drew abreast of Keller and his companion, the woman stopped long enough to unclip the dog's lead from his collar. She straightened up, and for a moment her gaze swept the bench where Keller and Myra Tannen sat, dismissing them even as she took note of them. Then she walked on, and Fluffy walked along at heel, both of them looking perfectly lethal.

"She's not supposed to do that," Myra said. "In the first place, he's supposed to be muzzled, and every dog's supposed to be kept on a leash."

"Well," Keller said.

"She wants him to kill other dogs. I saw her face when my Millicent was killed. It was quick, you know. He picked her up in his jaws and shook her and snapped her spine."

"Oh."

"And I saw her face. That's not where I was looking, I was watching what was happening, I was trying to do something, but my eyes went to her face, and she was . . . excited."

"Oh."

"That dog's a danger. Something has to be done about it. Are you going to—"

"Yes," he said, "but, you know, I can't have an audience when it happens. I'm not used to working under supervision."

"Oh, I know," she said, "and believe me, I won't do anything like this again. I won't approach you or follow you, nothing like that."

"Good."

"But, you see, I want to . . . well, amend the agreement."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Besides the dog."

"Oh?"

"Of course I want you to take care of the dog, but there's something else I'd like to have you do, and I'm prepared to pay extra for it. I mean, considerably extra."

The owner, too, he thought. Well, that was appropriate, wasn't it? The dog couldn't help its behavior, while the owner actively encouraged it.

She was carrying a tote bag bearing the logo of a bank, and she started to draw a large brown envelope from it, then changed her mind. "Take the whole thing," she said, handing him the tote bag. "There's nothing else in it, just the money, and it'll be easier to carry this way. Here, take it."

Not at all the professional way to do things, he thought. But he took the tote bag.

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"This is irregular," he said carefully. "I'll have to talk to my people in Chicago, and—"

"Why?"

He looked at her.

"They don't have to know about this," she said, avoiding his eyes. "This is just between you and me. It's all cash, and it's a lot more than the two of us gave you for the dog, and if you don't say anything about it to your people, well, you won't have to split with them, will you?"

He wasn't sure what to say to that, so he didn't say anything.

"I want you to kill her," she said, and there was no lack of conviction in her tone. "You can make it look like an accident, or like a mugging gone wrong, or, I don't know, a sex crime? Anything you want, it doesn't matter, just as long as she dies. And if it's painful, well, that's fine with me."

Was she wearing a wire? Were there plainclothes cops stationed behind the trees? And wouldn't that be a cute way to entrap a hit man. Bring him in to kill a dog, then raise the stakes and—

"Let me make sure I've got this straight. You're paying me this money yourself, and it's in cash, and nobody else is going to know about it."

"That's right."

"And in return you want me to take care of Aida Cuppering."

She stared at him. "Aida Cuppering? What do I care about Aida Cuppering?"

"I thought—"

"I don't care about her," Myra Tannen said. "I don't even care about her damn dog, not really. What I want you to do is kill Evelyn."

"What a mess," Dot said.

"No kidding."

"All I can say is I'm sorry I got you into this. Two women hired you to put a dog down, and you've met each of them face to face, and one of them knows where you live."

"She doesn't know that I live there," he said. "She thinks I flew in from Chicago. But she knows the address, and probably thinks I'm staying there for the time being."

"You never noticed you were being followed?"

"It never occurred to me to check. I walk home all the time, Dot. I never feel the need to look over my shoulder."

"And you'd never have to, if I'd borne in mind the old rule about not crapping where we eat. You know what it was, Keller? There were two reasons to turn the job down, because it was in New York and because it was a dog, and what I did, I let the two of them cancel each other out. My apologies.

"How much was in the bag?"

"Twenty-five."

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"I hope that's twenty-five thousand."

"It is."

"Because the way things have been going, it could have been twenty-five hundred."

"Or just plain twenty-five."

"That'd be a stretch. So the whole package is thirty-five. It's still a hard way to get rich. What's she got against Evelyn, anyway? It can't be that she's pissed she didn't get to go to the airport."

"Her husband's been having an affair with Evelyn."

"Oh. I thought it was Evelyn's husband that was fooling around."

"I thought so, too. I guess the Upper West Side's a hotbed of adultery."

"And here I always figured it was all concerts. What are you going to do, Keller?"

"I've been wondering that myself."

"I bet you have. A certain amount of damage control would seem to be indicated. I mean, two of them have seen your face."

"I know."

"And one of them followed you home. Which doesn't mean you can keep her, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't."

"I hope not. I gather both of them are reasonably attractive."

"So?"

"And they're probably attracted to you. A dangerous man, a mysterious character—how can they resist you?"

"I don't think they're interested," he said, "and I know I'm not."

"How about the dog owner? The one who looks like a dominatrix."

"I'm not interested in her, either."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it. You think you can find a way to make all of this go away?"

"I was ready to give back the money," he said, "but we're past that point. I'll think of something, Dot."

Just as Keller reached to knock on the door, it opened. Evelyn Augenblick, wearing a pants suit and a white blouse and a flowing bow tie, stood there beaming at him. "It's you," she said. "Thank God. Quick, so I can shut the door."

She did so, and turned to him, and he saw something he had somehow failed to notice before. She had a gun in her hand, a short-barreled revolver.

Keller didn't know what to make of it. She'd seemed relieved to see him, so what was the gun for? To shoot him? Or was she expecting somebody else, against whom she felt the need to defend herself?

And should he take a step toward her and swat the gun out of her hand? That would probably work, but if it didn't . . .

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"I guess you saw the ad," she said.

The ad? What ad?

"*Paul Niebauer, Please Get In Touch.*' On the front page of the *New York Times,* one of those tiny ads at the very bottom of the page. I always wondered if anybody read those ads. But you didn't, I can see by the look on your face. How did you know to come here?"

How indeed? "I just had a feeling," he said.

"Well, I'm glad you did. I didn't know how else to reach you, because I didn't want to go through the usual channels. And it was important that I see you."

"The gun," he said.

She looked at him.

"You're holding a gun," he said.

"Oh," she said, and looked at her hand, as if surprised to discover a gun in it. "That's for you," she said, and before he could react she handed the thing to him. He didn't want it, but neither did he want her to have it. So he took it, noting that it was a .38, and a loaded one at that.

"What's this for?" he asked.

She didn't exactly answer. "It belongs to my husband," she said. "It's registered. He has a permit to keep it on the premises, and that's what he does. He keeps it in the drawer of his bedside table. For burglars, he says."

"I don't really think it would be useful to me," he said. "Since it's registered to your husband, it would lead right back to you, which is the last thing we'd want, and—"

"You don't understand."

"Oh."

"This isn't for Fluffy."

"It's not?"

"No," she said. "I don't really care about Fluffy. Killing Fluffy won't bring Rilke back. And it's not so bad with Rilke gone, anyway. He was a beautiful dog, but he was really pretty stupid, and it was a pain in the ass having to walk him twice a day."

"Oh."

"So the gun has nothing to do with Fluffy," she explained. "The gun's for you to use when you kill my husband."

"Damnedest thing I ever heard of," Dot said. "And that covers a lot of ground. Well, she'd said her husband was running around on her. So she wants you to kill him?"

"With his own gun."

"Suicide?"

"Murder-suicide."

"Where does the murder come in?"

"I'm supposed to stage it," he said, "so that it looks as though he shot the woman he was having an affair with, then turned the gun

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on himself."

"The woman he's having the affair with."

"Right."

"Don't tell me, Keller."

"Okay."

"Keller, that's an expression. It doesn't mean I don't want to know. But I have a feeling I know already. Am I right, Keller?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's her, isn't it? Myra Tannenbaum."

"Just Tannen."

"Whatever. They both fly you in from the Windy City to kill a dog, and now neither one really gives a hoot in hell about the dog, and each one wants you to kill the other. How much did this one give you?"

"Forty-two thousand dollars."

"Forty-two thousand dollars? How did she happen to arrive at that particular number, do you happen to know?"

"It's what she got for her jewelry."

"She sold her jewelry so she could get her husband killed? I suppose it's jewelry her husband gave her in the first place, don't you think? Keller, this is beginning to have a definite 'Gift of the Magi' quality to it."

"She was going to give me the jewelry," he said, "since it was actually worth quite a bit more than she got for it, but she figured I'd rather have the cash."

"Amazing. She actually got something right. Didn't you tell me Myra Tannen's husband was having the affair with Evelyn?"

"That's what she told me, but it may have been a lie."

"Oh."

"Or maybe each of them is having an affair with the other's husband. It's hard to say for sure."

"Oh."

"I didn't know what to do, Dot."

"Keller, neither of us has known what to do from the jump. I assume you took the money."

"And the gun."

"And now you still don't know what to do."

"As far as I can see, there's only one thing I can do."

"Oh," she said. "Well, in that case, I guess you'll just have to go ahead and do it."

Myra Tannen lived in a brownstone, which meant there was no doorman to deal with. There was a lock, but Evelyn had provided a key, and at two-thirty the following afternoon, Keller tried it in the lock. It turned easily, and he walked in and climbed four flights of stairs. There were two apartments on the top floor, and he found the right door and rang the bell.

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He waited, and rang a second time, and followed it up with a knock. Finally he heard footsteps, and then the sound of the cover of the peephole being drawn back. "I can't see anything," Myra Tannen said.

He wasn't surprised; he'd covered the peephole with his palm. "It's me," he said. "The man you sat next to in the park."

"Oh?"

"I'd better come in."

There was a pause. "I'm not alone," she said at length.

"I know."

"But . . ."

"We've got a real problem here," he said, "and it's going to get a lot worse if you don't open the door."

It was almost three when he picked up the phone. He wasn't sure how good an idea it was to use the Tannen telephone. The police, checking the phone records, would know the precise time the call was made. Of course it would in all likelihood be just one of many calls made from the Tannen apartment to the Augenblick household across the street, and in any event all it could do was tie the two sets of people together, and what difference could that make to him?

Evelyn Augenblick answered on the first ring.

"Paul," he said. "Across the street."

"Oh, God."

"I think you should come over here."

"Are you sure?"

"It's all taken care of," he said, "but there are some things I really need your input on."

"Oh."

"You don't have to look at anything, if you don't want to."

"It's done?"

"It's done."

"And they're both . . ."

"Yes, both of them."

"Oh, good," she said. "I'll be right over. But you've got the key."

"Ring the bell," he said. "I'll buzz you in."

It didn't take her long. Time passed slowly in the Tannen apartment, but it was only ten minutes before the bell sounded. He poked the buzzer to unlock the door, and waited while she climbed the stairs, opening the door at her approach and beckoning her inside. She was already breathing hard from the four flights of stairs, and the sight of her husband and her friend did nothing to calm her down.

"Oh, this is perfect," she said. "Myra's in her nightgown, sprawled on her back, with two bullet holes in her chest. And George—he's barefoot, and wearing his pants but no shirt. The

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gun's still in his hand. What did you do, stick the gun in his mouth and pull the trigger? That's wonderful, it blew the whole back of his head off."

"Well, not quite, but—"

"But close enough. God, you really did it. They're both gone, I'll never have to look at either one of them again. And this is the way I get to remember them, and that's just perfect. You're a genius for thinking of this, getting me to see them like this. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, I'm not complaining, but why did you want me to come over here?"

"I thought it might be exciting."

"It is, but—"

"I thought maybe you could take off all your clothes."

Her jaw dropped. "My God," she said, "and here I thought *I* was kinky. Paul, I never even thought you were interested."

"Well, I am now."

"So it's exciting for you, too. And you want me to take my clothes off? Well, why not?"

She made a rather elaborate striptease of it, which was a waste of time as far as he was concerned, but it didn't take her too long. When she was naked he picked up her husband's gun, muffled it with the same throw pillow he'd used earlier, and shot her twice in the chest. Then he put the gun back in her husband's hand and got out of there.

It was hard to believe that they charged two dollars for a Good Humor. Keller wasn't positive, but it seemed to him he could remember paying fifteen or twenty cents for one. Of course, that had been many years ago, and everything had been cheaper way back when, and cost more nowadays.

But you really noticed it when it involved something you hadn't bought in years, and a Good Humor, ice cream on a stick, was not something he'd often felt a longing for. Now, though, walking in the park, he'd seen a vendor, and the urge for a chocolate-coated ice cream bar, with a firm chocolate center and assorted gook embedded in the chocolate coating, was well nigh irresistible. He'd paid the two dollars—he probably would have paid ten dollars just then, if he'd had to—and went over to sit on a bench and enjoy his Good Humor.

If only.

Because he couldn't really characterize his own humor as particularly good, or even neutral. He was, in fact, in a fairly dismal mood, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. There were things he liked about his work, but its immediate aftermath had never been one of them; whatever feeling of satisfaction came from a job well done was mitigated by the bad feeling brought about by the

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job's nature. He'd just killed three people, and two of them had been his clients. That wasn't the way things were supposed to go.

But what choice had he had? Both of the women had met him and seen his face, and one of them had tracked him to his apartment. He could leave them alive, but then he'd have to relocate to Chicago; it just wouldn't be safe to stay in New York, where there'd be all too great a chance of running into one or the other of them.

Even if he didn't, sooner or later one or the other would talk. They were amateurs, and if he did just what he was supposed to do originally—send Fluffy to that great dog run in the sky—either Evelyn or Myra would have an extra drink one night and delight in telling her friends how she'd managed to solve a problem in a sensible *Sopranos*-style way.

And of course if he executed the extra commission from one of them by killing the other, well, sooner or later the cops would talk to the survivor, who would hold out for about five minutes before spilling everything she knew. He'd have to kill Myra, because she'd followed him home and thus knew more than Evelyn, and that's what he'd done, thinking he might be able to leave it at that, but with George dead the cops would go straight to Evelyn, and . . .

He had to do it. Period, end of story.

And the way he left things, the cops wouldn't really have any reason to look much further. A domestic triangle, all three participants dead, all shot with the same gun, with nitrate particles in the shooter's hand and the last bullet fired through the roof of his mouth and into his brain. (And, as Evelyn had observed with delight, out the back of his skull.) It'd make tabloid headlines, but there was no reason for anyone to go looking for a mystery man from Chicago or anywhere else.

Usually, after he'd finished a piece of work, the next order of business was for him to go home. Whether he drove or flew or took a train, he'd thus be putting some substantial physical distance between himself and what he'd just done. That, plus the mental tricks he used to distance himself from the job, made it easier to turn the page and get on with his life.

Walking across the park wasn't quite the same thing.

He centered his attention on his Good Humor. The sweetness helped, no question about it. Took the sourness right out of his system. The sweetness, the creaminess, the tang of the chocolate center that remained after the last of the ice cream was gone—it was all just right, and he couldn't believe he'd resented paying two dollars for it. It would have been a bargain at five dollars, he decided, and an acceptable luxury at ten. It was gone now, but . . .

Well, couldn't he have another?

The only reason not to, he decided, was that it wasn't the sort of thing a person did. You didn't buy one ice cream bar and follow it with another. But why not? He wouldn't miss the two dollars, and

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weight had never been a problem for him, nor was there any particular reason for him to watch his intake of fat or sugar or chocolate. So?

He found the vendor, handed him a pair of singles. "Think I'll have another," he said, and the vendor, who may or may not have spoken English, took his money and gave him his ice cream bar.

He was just finishing the second Good Humor when the woman showed up. Aida Cuppering walked briskly along the path, wearing her usual outfit and flanked by her usual companion. She stopped a few yards from Keller's bench, but Fluffy strained at his leash, making a sound that was sort of an angry whimper. Keller looked in the direction the dog was pointing, and fifty yards or so up the path he saw what Fluffy saw, a Jack Russell terrier who was lifting a leg at the base of a tree.

"Oh, you good boy," Aida Cuppering said, even as she stooped to unclip the lead from Fluffy's collar.

"Go!" she said, and Fluffy went, tearing down the path at the little terrier.

Keller couldn't watch the dogs. Instead he looked at the woman, and that was bad enough, as she glowed with the thrill of the kill. After the little dog's yelping had ceased, after Cuppering's body had shuddered with whatever sort of climax the spectacle had afforded her, she looked over and realized that Keller was watching her.

"He needs his exercise," she said, smiling benignly, and turned to clap her hands to urge the dog to return.

Keller never planned what happened next. He didn't have time, didn't even think about it. He got to his feet, reached her in three quick strides, cupped her jaw with one hand and fastened the other on her shoulder, and broke her neck every bit as efficiently as her dog had broken the neck of the little terrier.

"So you saw Fluffy make a kill."

He was in White Plains, drinking a glass of iced tea and watching Dot's television. It was tuned to the Game Show Channel, and the sound was off. Game shows, he thought, were dopey enough when you could hear what the people were saying.

"No," he said. "I couldn't watch. The animal's a killing machine, Dot."

"Now that's funny," she said, "because I was just about to say the same thing about you. I don't get it, Keller. We take a job for short money because all you have to do is kill a dog. The next thing I know, four people are dead, and two of them used to be clients of ours. I don't know how we can expect them to recommend us to their friends, let alone give us some repeat business."

"I didn't have any choice, Dot."

"I realize that. They already knew too much when it was just going

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to be a dog that got killed, but as soon as human beings entered the equation, it became very dangerous to leave them alive."

"That's what I thought."

"And when you come right down to it, all you did was what each of them hired you to do. A says to kill B and C, you kill B and C. And then you kill A, because that's what B hired you to do. I have to say I think D came out of left field."

"D? Oh, Aida Cuppering."

"Nobody wanted her killed," she said, "and at last report nobody paid to have her killed. Was that what you call pro bono?"

"It was an impulse."

"No kidding."

"That dog of hers, killing other dogs is his nature, but there's no question she did everything she could to encourage it. Just because she liked to watch. I was supposed to kill the dog, but he was just a dog, you know?"

"So you broke her neck. If anyone had been watching . . ."

"Nobody was."

"A good thing, or you'd have had more necks to break. The police certainly seem puzzled. They seem to think the killing might have been the work of one of her clients. It seems she really was a dominatrix after all."

"She would sort of have to have been."

"And one of her clients lived in the apartment where the love triangle murder-suicide took place earlier that afternoon."

"George was her client?"

"Not George," she said. "George lived across the street with Evelyn, remember? No, her client was a man named Edmund Tannen."

"Myra's husband. I thought he was supposed to be having an affair with Evelyn."

"I don't suppose it matters who was doing what to whom," she said, "since they're all conveniently dead now. Or inconveniently, but one way or another, they've all been wiped off the board. I don't know about you, but I can't say I'm going to miss any of them."

"No."

"And from a financial standpoint, well, it's not the best payday we ever had, but it's not the worst, either. Ten for the dog and twenty-five for Evelyn and forty-two for Myra and George. You know what that means, Keller."

"I can buy some stamps."

"You sure can. You know the real irony here? Everybody else in the picture is dead, except for the Good Humor Man. You didn't do anything to him, did you?"

"No, for God's sake. Why would I?"

"Who knows why anybody would do anything. But except for him, they're all dead. Except for the one creature you were supposed to kill in the first place."

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"Fluffy."

"Uh-huh. What is it, professional courtesy? One killing machine can't bear to kill another?"

"He'll get sent to the YMCA," he said, "and when nobody adopts him, which they won't because of his history, he'll be put to sleep."

"Is that what they do at the YMCA?"

"Is that what I said? I meant the SPCA."

"That's what I figured."

"The animal shelter, whatever you want to call it. She lived alone, so there's nobody else to take the dog."

"In the paper," Dot said, "it says they found him standing over her body, crying plaintively. But I don't suppose you stuck around to watch that part."

"No, I went straight home," he said. "And this time nobody followed me."

The following Thursday afternoon, the phone was ringing when he got back to his apartment. "Stay," he said. "Good boy." And he went and picked up the phone.

"There you are," Dot said. "I tried you earlier but I guess you were out."

"I was."

"But now you're back," she said. "Keller, is everything all right? You seemed a little out of it when you left here the other day."

"No, I'm okay."

"That's really all I called to ask, because I just . . . Keller, what's that sound?"

"It's nothing."

"It's a dog."

"Well," he said.

"This whole dog business, it made you miss Nelson, so you went out and got yourself a dog. Right?"

"Not exactly."

" 'Not exactly.' What's that supposed to mean? Oh, no. Keller, tell me it's not what I think it is."

"Well."

"You went out and adopted that goddam killing machine. Didn't you? You decided putting him to sleep would be a crime against nature, and you just couldn't bear for that to happen, softhearted creature that you are, and now you've saddled yourself with a crazed, bloodthirsty beast that's going to make your life a living hell. Does that pretty much sum it up, Keller?"

"No."

"No?"

"No," he said. "Dot, they sent the dog to a shelter, just the way I said they would."

"Well, there's a big surprise. I thought for sure they'd run him

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for the Senate on the Republican ticket."

"But it wasn't the SPCA."

"Or the YMCA either, I'll bet."

"They sent him to IBARF."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Inter-Boro Animal Rescue Foundation, IBARF for short."

"Whatever you say."

"And the thing about IBARF," he said, "is they never euthanize an animal. If it's not adoptable, they just keep it there and keep feeding it until it dies of old age."

"How old is Fluffy?"

"Not that old. And, you know, it's not like a maximum-security institution there. Sooner or later somebody would leave a cage open, and Fluffy would get a chance to kill a dog or two."

"I think I see where this is going."

"Well, what choice did I have, Dot?"

"That's the thing with you these days, Keller. You never seem to have any choice, and you wind up doing the damnedest things. I'm surprised they let you adopt him."

"They didn't want to. I explained how I needed a vicious dog to guard a used-car lot after hours."

"One that would keep other dogs from breaking in and driving off in a late-model Honda. I hope you gave them a decent donation."

"I gave them a hundred dollars."

"Well, that'll pay for fifty Good Humors, won't it? How does it feel, having a born killer in your apartment?"

"He's very sweet and gentle," he said. "Jumps up on me, licks my face."

"Oh, God."

"Don't worry, Dot. I know what I have to do."

"What you have to do," she said, "is go straight to the SPCA, or even the YMCA, as long as it's not some chicken-hearted outfit like IBARF. Some organization that you can count on to put Fluffy down in a humane manner, and to do it as soon as possible. Right?"

"Well," he said, "not exactly."

"What a nice dog," the young woman said.

The animal, Keller had come to realize, was an absolute babe magnet. In the mile or so he'd walked from his apartment to the park, this was the third woman to make a fuss over Fluffy. This one said the same thing the others had said: that the dog certainly looked tough and capable, but that he really was just a big baby, wasn't he? Wasn't he?

Keller wanted to urge her to get down on all fours and bark. Then she'd find out just what kind of a big old softie Fluffy was.

He'd waited until twilight, hoping to avoid as many dogs and dogwalkers as possible, but there were still some to be found, and

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Fluffy was remarkably good at spotting them. Whenever he caught sight of one, or caught the scent, his ears perked up and he strained at the leash. But Keller kept a good tight hold on it, and kept leading the dog to the park's less-traveled paths.

It would have been easy to follow Dot's advice, to pay another hundred dollars and palm the dog off on the SPCA or some similar institution. But suppose they got their signals crossed and let someone adopt Fluffy? Suppose, one way or another, something went wrong and he got a chance to kill more dogs?

This wasn't something to delegate. This was something he had to do for himself. That was the only way to be sure it got done, and got done properly. Besides, it was something he'd hired on to do long ago. He'd been paid, and it was time to do the work.

He thought about Nelson. It was impossible, walking in the park with a dog on a leash, not to think about Nelson. But Nelson was gone. In all the time since Nelson's departure, it had never seriously occurred to him to get another dog. And, if it ever did, this wasn't the dog he'd get.

He patted his pocket. There was a small-caliber gun in it, an automatic, unregistered, and never fired since it came into his possession several years ago. He'd kept it, because you never knew when you might need a gun, and now he had a use for it.

"This way, Fluffy," he said. "That's a good boy." ●

THEIR LUCK JUST WENT FROM BAD TO CATASTROPHIC...

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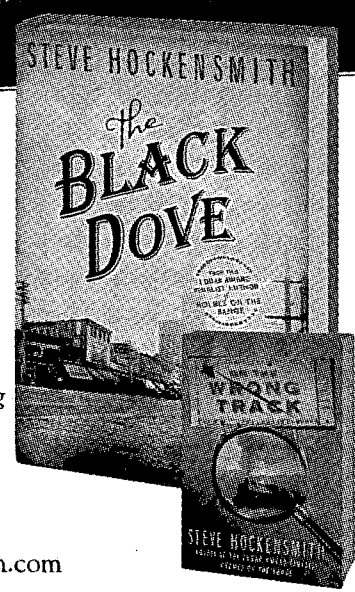

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BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

People occasionally ask me how many blogs I read. I really don't know how to answer except to say, "A lot." (My wife would say, "Too many.") It's the old story: So many blogs, so little time.

Another good question, and one that I have a better answer for, is "How do you keep up with them?" That's simple. I use Google as my homepage when I log onto the Internet, and I have the page set up so that my bookmarks appear in the upper lefthand corner. One of those bookmarks is for the "Google Reader," a neat little feature that allows me to type in the URL of a blog I want to read. After that, every time there's a new post on the blog, that post pops up in Google Reader. I open the reader a few times a day, click on the blog I'm interested in, and read the post.

One of the blogs in the Google Reader queue is *The Good Girls Kill for Money Club* (**http://www.good-girls-kill.com**), a joint venture of authors Tasha Alexander, Laura Bradford, Regina Harvey, Diana Killian, and Sara Rossett. Whether they're discussing a great website like Pandora (http://www.pandora.com/), Black Friday, or birthdays, there's always something interesting going on. At the moment, the blog even features a poll so that you can vote for the kind of posts you'd like to read. If that poll has disappeared by the time you read this, there will probably be another one. Drop by and see.

And then there's a blog called *Naked Authors* (**http://www.nakedauthors.com**). As much as I hate to disappoint you, it's not a calendar site. Instead, it's another group blog, and it presents "the naked truth about literature and life." The Naked Authors (fully clothed in all the snapshots on the blog site) are best-selling writers Paul Levine, Cornelia Read, Patricia Smiley, James O. Born, Jacqueline Winspear, and occasional guest bloggers like James Grippando and Kate Flora. You might get a discussion of football players' names, something about an author's current novel, or a photo of banjos. That's one of the entertaining things about reading blogs: You never know what kind of surprise is going to show up on one of them, and there's always something new.

Sandra Ruttan's first novel, *What Burns Within,* will be published in May. She calls her blog *On Life & Other Inconveniences* (**http://sandrablabber.blogspot.com**), and she writes about whatever strikes her fancy or, sometimes, whatever makes her angry. She also writes about her novel and her editorial work on *Spinetingler*, a mystery webzine. She's always passionate about what she's discussing, and that's what makes her blog one to check regularly.

Bill Crider's own blog can be found at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

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MOTHER DEAR

by Robert Barnard

Our mother bore six children at a time when large families were rare, and in a small town where they were commented on with pursed lips, or accompanied by a salacious leer. I say "my mother bore" not because we arrived from her womb (though, unlikely as that seemed to us, we did) but because our father played no part in our early lives that we can easily recall: He was always "at work" or "down the allotment," whence came shrivelled greens and carrots, gnarled turnips, and potatoes scarred by spade marks. Our mother was our life, and I suppose that, just as a dog on a lead has his owner on a lead as well, we were hers.

In 2003 Robert Barnard received the CWA's Cartier Diamond Dagger Award for Lifetime Achievement. The many other awards he's received over the course of his career as a novelist and short story writer are too numerous to mention, though it's worth noting that his two most recent honors were nominations for the Agatha and Macavity awards for his 2006 *EQMM* story "Provenance."

She was not, I emphasize, a motherly person: Nor, I imagine, did she participate joyfully in the process by which our existences were set in train. She was dour and hard, the sergeant-major of the house. I never remember her embracing me or kissing me, or any of the other five, for she had no favourites. We were her life because she organised us: As soon as we were capable of doing anything around the house we were taught it and then kept at it. Kept at it, in fact, all the hours we were home from school. Teaching these home duties was done by slaps or worse on the bare legs, or cuffs around the head. Threats kept us at our tasks, and the threats were always carried out if our efforts fell short of her expectations in any way. Our hours at school were our times of pleasure. During our hours at home we were worked as hard as any mill child or young chimney-sweep in the nineteenth century.

If my mother had been a literary person one could say she had modelled herself on Mrs. Joe Gargery. Hair drawn sharply back into a bun, hard features, her ruling us by her feared hand—

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certainly she could be said to have brought us up by hand. In fact she never read—not book nor even newspaper, which our father would often doze over. Her joy was in organising, and she spent all her spare time doing that.

Our only pleasure at home was sometimes listening to the wireless. Not while we were working: That would mean our minds were not on the menial tasks she had ordered us to do. But later, just before we went to bed, she might put on the Home Service, and we might hear part of a play, the news, or a light concert. I formed my love of operetta then. It enchanted me because everybody seemed so *happy*. If my mother had not been tone deaf she would have turned it off as a bad influence.

And she would have been wise to do so. It *was* a bad influence from her point of view. It confirmed for me what I had sensed from school, that there was another way, that other families were not organised into a monstrous regiment of children, that happiness in other families, while not constant, was at least possible.

I said this to Annie, my elder sister.

"We're not like other families," I said.

"I know."

"They have *fun*. They have mothers who love them."

"I know they do."

"What should we do about it?"

"I don't know."

That was not a very satisfactory conversation, but I remember it because it brought the subject out into the open for the first time. Of course we had had conversations—at night before bed, on the way to school—in which we said how much we hated Mother. But this one aired the possibility that something might be done about it. We considered complaining to the Social Services or the police, but we knew nothing about the former, not even where its offices were, and we thought we might simply be taken "into care," which sounded vaguely threatening, like the devil you don't know. We occasionally saw a policeman or woman on the beat, but the thought of going up to him or her and complaining that our mother worked us like slaves every hour of the day, every minute we were home, was too daunting to give serious consideration to: He (or she) would probably laugh at us, and ridicule is something children hate. Or if they did see there was a problem, they would most likely call and talk it over with Mother. The consequences didn't bear thinking about.

"I don't see there's any alternative," said Annie one day. "We'll just have to kill her."

I thought, then nodded, and said nothing more. The idea incubated, took on strange forms, ballooned, but the main thing was, it was there, and the next few weeks saw a great deal of discussion, vague plans.

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The plan Annie and I discussed most often was one in which all of us children had some part in the killing, so that no one of us (we thought) could be convicted of the crime of murder. For example, Mother was to be poisoned, and one child was to procure the poison, another to procure the strong drink it was to be administered in, another to put the poison in the drink, another to lure her to taste it. As a discussion topic it was admirable. We realised quite soon that we could not go into a chemist's and ask for poison over the counter, let alone one unknown to Western science (something I felt was ideal). We then talked about a break-in at the pharmacy (break-in had a nice sound involving physical action rather than a special skill) but the plan fell through when we started to talk about what it was we were trying to get hold of. We had no idea what was a poison and what was not. We might just choose a drug that would give her diarrhea, which would be funny but wouldn't do anything to change the situation.

"We could push her over a cliff, or out of a high window," said Annie. That would have been fine if we had not lived in a small town in Lincolnshire—county of low-lying fens. There was a distinct lack of high-rise buildings as well.

We had got no further than deciding we would say our mother had gone to help her sister in Middlesborough who was suffering from an inoperable (we used the word fatal, and had to explain that to the little ones) cancer when it happened. I say "it happened" because that's how it felt. We had, after all the discussions, no plan, and it may have been that it was that that caused the welling up in me of a sense of frustration, of impotence, of a mother-directed rage. . . .

It was about seven o'clock on an autumn evening. Our father had eaten his "tea," and after a snooze had gone down to the British Legion Club, which he always did on Friday nights. He asked me to put his tools away in the garden shed, and told my little brother Martin he could put the piles of weeds that were dotted around the flower beds in the back garden onto the compost heap. Martin was—is—the best of us, the most sensible, the most brain-alive. If he had been older he would either have thought up a plan for Mother's murder or slapped down our plotting as sheer childish delusions.

It was when he was coming back from the compost heap that it happened. He had filthy hands, and not only that: He had slipped, fallen, and his short trousers were brown with leaf-mould. Mother appeared at the kitchen door. Probably she had been looking through the kitchen window, awaiting disaster.

"Just look at you! Filthy child!" She grabbed from the window-ledge where it always lay a little bundle of twigs with which she always beat our bare legs to relieve her feelings. "I'll teach you to get yourself all over muck."

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She grabbed him to her. He sobbed and worked himself out of her grasp, leaving his pullover in her hands. "You just wait, you little monkey," she yelled, and started after him.

But she never reached him. I was collecting up Dad's garden tools and I had just taken from off the path a heavy spade. I was a strong fourteen-year-old—made strong not by athletics or team games but by slavery around the house. I raised the spade and brought it down with all the force at my command on Mother's head. She fell forward to the ground, then rolled over, her eyes looking vengefully at me. She repeated her last words:

"You just wait, you little—"

Then she died.

I felt nothing as I looked down on her. Not grief, not guilt, not even exhilaration. Annie, as usual, chimed in with my reactions. She appeared at the front door and after a moment, seeing the stillness of the body, she said: "Go and get a blanket and cover her up."

I fetched a blanket from the top shelf of the wardrobe in our bedroom. We wrapped her in it and pulled her to a dark corner down the side of the house that had never been a home. Then we talked about what we should do when Dad came home (always, in the days and weeks ahead, we talked about our next move, never looked further into the future).

The result of this discussion was that when Dad came home we told him that we'd had a telegram from Auntie Kath in Middlesborough, and Mother had gone by train to nurse her through cancer. Our father thought for a bit, and then said, "Oh aye?" and settled down to read the front pages of the daily newspaper.

Before he went to bed, he said: "It's funny, your mother never had a good word to say about your Auntie Kath."

Annie, who was proving a tower of strength, said: "But it's cancer. That makes it different, doesn't it?"

Our father thought. "Aye, 'appen," he said.

That night at 2 A.M., in total silence, Annie and I buried our mother in a patch of earth at the bottom of the garden which my father had tried to turn into a vegetable patch but had given up when the soil proved too poor and too often waterlogged. With her we buried a small suitcase which our mother always kept packed with emergency things for if any of us suddenly had to go to hospital. We added two dresses of hers, a cardigan, blouse, and skirt, and a great deal of unattractive underwear. The parental bedroom was at the front of the house and Dad slept on, as did the scattered neighbours. By three o'clock Annie and I were in the two undersized beds we called ours in the bedroom we shared.

Next morning Annie cooked for our dad his usual fried breakfast. "I'll have to help with the cooking," he said, "while your mum's away." He never did cook more than about once a month, but he did

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pull his weight by doing all the heavy shopping, the bill paying, and his usual gardening, avoiding almost all the costs of vegetables. The rest of the running of the house went like clockwork. It always had, but we did what we'd always done with much less frequency, and with a much lighter heart. The younger children were a bit of a problem at first. We enjoined on Martin that he was to say nothing to any of them about what he'd seen. The young ones told everyone that Mummie was away, nursing Auntie, and then they forgot about her in the blessedly free and contented atmosphere that was evolving in the house.

The first problem that emerged was what to say about our mother's absence. Dad didn't mention her for days after she "left," but as the days stretched to weeks I decided we had to make the first moves. "I thought we'd have heard from Mum by now," I said one night when the little ones were in bed. "Never a great one with her pen or pencil," said Father.

"She could telephone Mrs. Cowper down the road," I said, mentioning the only household nearby that was on the phone. "They were never great friends," said Dad. And that was true. Our mother had no female friends, and certainly no male ones either. It was Dad who made the next move.

"I begin to doubt your mother's coming home at all," he said one day. " 'Appen she likes being free of us."

That was a turning point. Henceforth Mother's return was an "if" rather than a "when." We heard from friends at school that down at the British Legion our father had speculated about whether she'd "found a new bloke." We sniggered at the unlikelihood of it, but not while Dad was around. Soon we became a different family unit, one with a dad, an acting mum in Annie, and a cooperating family coping with all the duties of the household. We were a happy home. One of Dad's "sayings," things he came out with regularly, was "I don't think your mum knew how to be happy." Now we did. Her death had released us.

And we all did well. In our way we were a successful family. Martin went to university at Leeds, and later became a lecturer at Durham University. He specialised in Law. Clare, the second girl, became a nurse and went out to Australia, where she married and had a family. Vince, the second boy, became a motor mechanic and was famous in the neighbourhood as one who could fathom and nurse back to health any make of motor engine. Paul, the third boy, became manager of a large bookshop. Annie—dear, "without whom" Annie—became a primary-school teacher, and had a large and wonderfully happy family.

We had reunions for many years, which sometimes even Clare managed to attend. They always made me think back to the early years of our "liberation," when in the evenings we sat round the wireless, and eventually (a thrilling day in the family's life) the

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television set. We could bring friends home from school then, and Dad emerged as someone who loved having children around him. In the summer we had little treats—usually excursions: to Skegness, Cambridge, and, most excitingly, to London.

I sometimes read crime novels and they never have a happy ending. Not a *really* happy one. Ours did. I shudder to think what would have become of us if we had spent all our childhood in the shadow of our mother. As it was, the liberation was quick and almost total: Within a week or two laughter was heard in the house. Quite soon after that we children had spells when we were positively boisterous. That murder freed us, allowed us to be natural, allowed us to be happy.

Dad said that once, towards the end of his life. "By 'eck, it's been a happy home, has this one," he said. I thought he wanted to say more, get close to the reason why it had become happy, but all he followed it up with was: "It's been happy for you, hasn't it, lad?"

"Yes, Dad," I said. "I've had a very happy life."

I haven't said much about me because I was the one who stayed at home. I became an accountant, and Dad and I shared the work of the house that we couldn't get done by a cleaning lady. I knew I couldn't leave the house, not with that *thing* buried down the end of the back garden. And I couldn't bring a wife there, have children there. Anything could have happened while I was out at work, what with Dad's passion for gardening and kiddies' love for buckets and spades. It was better as it was. And there was no guarantee I could have got a wife if I'd wanted to. I was presentable enough, when I was younger, but accountancy as a job did not stir many women's blood.

Dad had a long and happy retirement. When he died of prostate cancer at the age of seventy-seven I was just fifty. He lay in the hospital bed, trying to conceal his pain, often thanking me for all I'd done for him, as he put it. One day he said:

"It turned out all right, lad, didn't it?"

"Our lives? 'Course they did, Dad."

"No, I mean . . . the business with your mother." The nearest occupied bed in the hospital was some way away. I swallowed.

"Mother? What did you know about that?"

" 'Appen more than you knew. I checked on the night she disappeared that there was still the case she packed should anyone be rushed off to hospital. It was where it always was, in that old wardrobe on the landing. And I checked next day as well and it were gone. And I knew that the spade you put away in the shed had earth on it, though I hadn't used it at all the day before. And I was bound to see where the earth had been turned over." He took my hand, shook it, and then kissed it. "You did a good job, David. The best thing you ever did. Don't let anyone tell you different."

I nodded. When I thought about it, I decided the final tally con-

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cerning what I had done was not too bad: five children growing up to be fine adults, a man rescued from a hideous marriage. If I was the exception, it was because I was the one who did it. I was and am a special case. All the time I was nursing Dad I was having funny visions of bars growing inside the windows of our house, felt that the open prison I had lived in up to then was turning into a high-security one. Dad's death, when it came, would not release me, nor did it. I had no friends, though the family who were still around in the neighbourhood were friends, and those are the best kind.

Now I am retired, and I work in the garden, though not *there,* and listen to the radio, watch a bit of television. I like to know about other people's lives. But I like to know about them from afar: I have grown so used to my house, and sometimes it seems to me that I have always been old in it. And now I know I have come to love it. Here is enshrined everything I have achieved. I am a prisoner who has come to love his cell. Nothing is left of the David who might have been. I am watching from outside, as if I was dead. I killed our mother, and she in her turn has killed me. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Problem of the Secret Patient

by Edward D. Hoch

In Northmont, we'd felt the effects of the war from the beginning, through the lives of our half-dozen brave local boys who'd died in combat (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was telling his visitor as he poured a small libation for them both), but it was in October of 'forty-four that the war really came home to our town, in a strange way that's been kept secret for all these years.

It started for me when I was visited at my office one gloomy October Monday by a well-dressed young man with chiseled features who introduced himself as Robert Barnovich. He was probably in his thirties and I wondered why he wasn't in the service. "What seems to be your problem?" I asked. He didn't look or dress like a local and my first thought was that he'd been stricken ill while on the road.

"No health problem, Dr. Hawthorne." He flipped open a card case and showed me a badge and photo ID. "Special Agent Barnovich of the FBI."

"Well!" was all I could think to say.

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He smiled. "Don't worry, you're not under arrest. I've been sent to discuss a situation that will be arising here in two days' time. You understand this is top secret. The hospital administration knows, of course, and I'm telling you because your office is here at Pilgrim Memorial and you're likely to be consulted on the case. Also, you've been cleared through a background check. We're bringing in a secret patient from overseas. He's had certain injuries that are not believed to be life-threatening. He'll arrive here with his head and face bandaged, partly because of the injuries but also to keep his identity secret."

"Is it Hitler?" I asked with a smile.

The FBI man's face remained grim. "It is not Hitler, but that's all I can say. He'll be well guarded during his stay, but not a word of this is to leak out. Is that understood?"

"I suppose so. But why in heaven's name are you bringing him to Pilgrim Memorial rather than one of the big government hospitals?"

"The decision was made after careful study. The government wanted an East Coast hospital that was easier to reach from Europe. And they wanted a first-rate small-town hospital where a secret patient wasn't likely to attract the attention of the media. I'm told the Surgeon General considered the attributes of ten small East Coast hospitals before settling on Pilgrim Memorial."

"I suppose we should be honored at that. Tell me one thing. Does this patient speak and understand English?"

"To some extent, yes. That's all I can say."

"And he'll arrive on Wednesday the eighteenth?"

"That's correct."

"Will you be here?"

He gave a brief nod. "I'll be here with my men as long as he is."

That night over dinner I told Annabel about it. Samantha was three months old now and Annabel was back to work at the Ark a few hours a day, taking our daughter with her. Soon she hoped to be back full time, and we'd need someone to take care of Samantha. But not yet.

"What does it mean, Sam? A captured Nazi that they're flying over here?"

"I don't know. It's someone important, with the FBI involved."

"I'm glad to know you passed the background check. They proba-

It seems that *EQMM*'s editors are not alone in their admiration for Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne series. The latest Hawthorne collection has placed fifth on the list of the year's best translated mysteries in Japan. The notice appeared in *Kodansha In-Pocket* magazine. Other authors who placed high on the list: Michael Connelly, Carl Hiaasen, Ann Cleeves, and Patricia Cornwell. ✝

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bly don't know you tell your wife everything."

"You needed to know," I answered defensively. "I might have to work overtime some nights."

The war news that weekend had reported the death of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel three months after his supposed injury in an auto accident. We'd known for some time that his head injuries were actually caused by Allied planes strafing his staff car in July. Rommel had been friendly with the generals behind the failed plot to assassinate Hitler, and some rumors even had him taking command of the country if the plot had succeeded. But now, with his death, a state funeral was planned.

"Would it have made any difference if Hitler had been killed?" Annabel had wondered back in July when the news broke.

"Germany might have surrendered rather than fight to the death as they're doing now." With the conspirators dead and a half-crazed Hitler still in control, the inevitable Allied victory stretched further into the future.

Tuesday morning was a quiet day at the hospital, but from my office wing I could detect preparations being made for the new arrival. Lincoln Jones, the black doctor who'd delivered our baby, stopped by the office to ask how Samantha was doing. After I told him all was well and Samantha was even accompanying my wife to work a few hours each day, Lincoln asked, "What's going on at the hospital? They've closed off several rooms at the end of the south corridor and are moving in some equipment."

"It's all very hush-hush," I confirmed. "Some sort of secret patient is arriving tomorrow. The FBI's in charge."

"Why here?"

"They wanted a good small hospital on the East Coast. I suppose we should consider it a compliment."

"Are you involved, Sam?"

"I was told they might call on me."

"Who do you think it is?"

"I've a hunch it might be some top Nazi prisoner, but the FBI assured me it's not Hitler."

Lincoln Jones gave a familiar grunt. "And what will your job be? To cure him or kill him?"

It was Dr. Dwight Pryor, the hospital administrator, who came to my office on Wednesday morning. He was a gaunt, well-dressed man with glasses and a moustache, who rarely wore the white jacket that was the uniform of other staff physicians. I barely knew the man, and his only other visit to my office had come when he first took over as administrator and visited all the doctors with offices in the building.

"Dr. Pryor," I said, rising to shake his hand. "You're a rare visitor to our wing of the building."

He sat down without being asked. "You and Dr. Jones have your

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own practices; you're not part of the hospital's staff. But with this new situation I thought I should speak with you. I understand Special Agent Barnovich has already filled you in on the basics."

"Somewhat. I know we're receiving some sort of secret patient today."

"Correct, and that's about all I know, too. He's going to be under close supervision during his stay here, which I understand will be only a matter of a few days. If his health is satisfactory he'll be transferred elsewhere."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Dr. Francis will be examining him, and he will call on you if needed. While the patient is at Pilgrim Memorial he will be known as Mr. Fuchs."

"A German name."

"Yes, but that means nothing."

After he left I called my nurse April into my office and told her what little I knew. With her husband still away in the service, she was anxious to help in any way she could. "I just want to get André back home in one piece," she told me. "Do you think this might be some important Nazi who will reveal information?"

"I have no idea," I answered honestly. "But while he's here I want you to be able to reach me at all times. Whenever I'm out of the office you'll have a phone number where I can be contacted."

She glanced out my window. "It looks as if the mystery man is arriving now."

Sure enough, an ambulance had pulled up to the hospital's emergency entrance and a patient on a stretcher was being removed. I could see his bandaged head, and a couple of men in suits accompanying him. I recognized one as Agent Barnovich. "I'd better go out to greet them," I said.

Dr. Pryor was there too, and Judd Francis, the primary physician on the case. I knew him socially, and he'd treated a couple of my patients with head injuries, his specialty. "What's up, Judd?" I asked him. "Your mysterious patient arriving?"

"Hello, Sam. Yeah, he's here. I'll probably be calling on you to check his vital signs. I'll be examining his head injury to see how it's healing."

"I've got some free time now if you want to get started."

He nodded. "Let's do it. The faster we give him a clean bill the sooner he'll be out of here, along with his keepers." He nodded toward the FBI agents.

"Any idea who he is?"

He shook his head. "He's just a patient. I don't ask questions. Come in with me while we take off the bandages. Then you'll know as much as I do."

Special Agent Barnovich and his team were careful to search everyone entering the patient's room and to check all food, water,

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and medication. It seemed they feared someone might try to kill him. After we'd passed inspection, I stood by the bed while the patient had his head bandages carefully removed by Dr. Francis. One of the FBI men was at the door, his back to us. The face that came into view was that of a ruggedly handsome man in his fifties with his head shaved for treatment of wounds. The man opened his eyes and Judd Francis asked, "Do you understand English?"

"Some," the man answered, shifting slightly in his bed. "Where am I?"

"You're in America, in a place called Northmont. They brought you here for a medical checkup before you move on."

"I see," he muttered and closed his eyes. I wondered if he'd been drugged.

"I'm Dr. Francis and this is Dr. Hawthorne. We'll be examining you for the next few days. My nurse, Marcia O'Toole, will be looking after you, too. What can you tell me about these head wounds, Mr. Fuchs?" It was the first time he'd used the patient's supposed name.

"Fuchs?" the man repeated with a half chuckle. "Is that the name they gave me?"

"Yes."

"It is as good as any, I suppose. The head wounds came about three months ago when my car was strafed by an enemy plane."

"I see. They seem to have healed well."

"I still have frequent headaches."

"How frequent?"

"A few times a week."

"That's probably normal, but we'll X-ray you. I'm the head man around here." It was a line he loved to use. "Dr. Hawthorne will handle the rest of your body."

The jokes were lost on Fuchs, who remained silent. It was a good time for me to escape. "I'll be in to see you later," I promised the patient.

On the way out I stopped to see Marcia O'Toole, the nurse who'd been assigned to him. She was an attractive young woman in her mid twenties who'd lost an older brother to the war in North Africa. I didn't know her well, but we'd chatted a few times. "I understand you'll be helping with our new patient," I said.

"That's what I hear. I've already got that G-man Barnovich breathing down my neck."

"Don't mind him. He's just doing his job."

She laughed. "He's doing more than his job. He asked me for a date."

That night at home Annabel quizzed me about Fuchs. "Who is he?" she wanted to know. "A German prisoner?"

"Perhaps. He spoke his few words of English with a German accent. They must think he has important information if the FBI is guarding him so carefully."

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"You said Judd Francis is the attending physician?"

I nodded. "Because of the head injury, which is pretty well healed now. Judd did a thorough examination of his head and neck. At first I was only going to be on call if they needed me, but somehow I've gotten the job of giving him a complete physical."

My wife smiled. "The FBI checked you out and decided you were trustworthy."

"That may be the answer. I'll be examining him in the morning and maybe I'll learn something."

I stopped at my office the following morning to tell April I'd be in the hospital examining Mr. Fuchs for the next few hours. When I entered his room Marcia O'Toole was washing him and brushing his teeth. "He's still weak but he's coming along, aren't you, Mr. Fuchs?"

"Ah . . . yes," he managed between brushings, still a bit dazed from his medication.

"The sun's out today. Maybe later I can wheel you outside for a bit," Nurse O'Toole said, flipping her brown hair as she spoke, almost as if she was flirting with him. But I'd seen her do the same thing with doctors and other patients.

When she'd finished the clean-up I took over, checking his pulse and temperature and blood pressure, asking him all the routine questions about his health. He told me his age was fifty-two, that he'd be fifty-three the following month. We talked a bit, and though he admitted to being German he said nothing about the circumstances that had brought him here under FBI guard. Once he asked me, "What day is this?"

"Thursday, October nineteenth," I replied.

"Is that all? It seems it should be so much later." The more he spoke the easier it was for me to understand his accent.

"You seem in pretty good shape. I think we'll be able to send you on your way soon."

"To where?"

"That's not for me to say."

The following day, when we were alone, he engaged me in further conversation. "How long will I be here?" he asked after I'd checked his temperature and the usual vital signs.

"Perhaps only another day. Dr. Pryor, the hospital administrator, is anxious to get things back to normal."

"I am disrupting your routine?"

"Not you, but the FBI certainly is."

"For that I regret."

"You're an important person. They must guard you well."

"I am not important," he said quietly. "I am dead."

Before I could ask him what he meant, we were interrupted by Barnovich, the FBI man. "You about done in there, Doc? I have to speak with Mr. Fuchs."

"Just finishing up," I said, and retreated from the room.

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Dr. Pryor visited my office after lunch to see how things were going. "Have you completed your examinations, Sam?"

"All but the blood tests. I'll have those results in the morning."

"Good! Judd Francis has cleared him as far as the head wounds are concerned."

"Where will he be going next?"

Pryor lowered his voice. "The rumor is that he'll be taken to Shangri-La to meet with the President."

"Where?"

"It's a secret camp somewhere in the Maryland hills where FDR goes to get away from Washington."

"He's that important a person?"

"Apparently."

"I'll have the blood results in the morning," I assured him.

Saturday morning was my last opportunity to speak with the patient, and I took advantage of it. Barnovich was on duty at the door, but he seemed more interested in flirting with Nurse O'Toole than in paying attention to what we were talking about.

"Tell me what happened to you," I urged my patient. "You'll probably be gone by the end of the day and we'll never see each other again. The rumor is that you're on your way to meet our President."

Fuchs gazed at me sadly. "You are a good doctor. You treat me well. What is today? Saturday? I will tell you what happened. They came to my house a week ago today, men whom I thought to be my friends. After the unsuccessful plot to kill the *Führer* in July, many of us were suspect. Because of my wounds they left me alone for a time, but then last week they came. I was never part of the plot, but I did know about it in advance. That was enough to condemn me. I was given a choice—a tiny cyanide capsule that would kill me in three seconds, or a trial for treason that would ruin my family. The cyanide was my only true choice. I went off with them in a car to the place where I would swallow the capsule. All left me except one man who had been my friend. I held the tiny capsule in my hand."

"But how did you—?"

"Escape? If that is what this is. The man was still my friend. He drove me over a dirt road to a field where a small unmarked plane was waiting. What he did may have cost him his life, but I am eternally grateful. Of course the government could not report my defection to the Allied side. They announced that I had finally died from my accident injuries, and a state funeral was planned." He smiled sadly. "A funeral without a corpse."

"Tell me who you are."

He shook his head. "Call me Fuchs. My real name is unimportant."

I held out my hand to shake his. "Good luck, wherever they take you."

"I will remember your kindness, Dr. Hawthorne. We are all on this earth together. It is only politics that sometimes makes

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enemies of us."

Those were the last words our secret patient ever spoke to me. I was awakened during the night with news that he was dead.

It was not yet dawn when I reached the hospital, but already Sheriff Lens was on the scene. I hadn't been told the cause of death, and his presence alarmed me. "Are you here about the death of a man named Fuchs?" I asked.

"Guess so, Doc. The boss, Dr. Pryor, reported it as a possible poisoning."

"I can't imagine that. He was being guarded by a team of FBI agents."

"We'll see."

The first person we encountered inside the hospital was Agent Barnovich, looking flustered and frightened. "It couldn't have happened," he told us. "No one could have poisoned him. We tested every bit of food and drink that went into that room."

"We'll want to talk with Dr. Pryor first," Sheriff Lens told him.

We found the hospital administrator breathless in the corridor outside the room occupied by Fuchs. "What happened?" I asked.

"We don't know. Dr. Francis was in the emergency room with an accident victim a little after three o'clock. He decided to stop in and see if Fuchs was sleeping well. Barnovich was outside by the door and they checked him together. They found him dead. There was an odor of bitter almonds—"

"Cyanide?"

"We're doing an immediate autopsy. That's what we suspect."

Sheriff Lens turned to me. "What do you think, Doc?"

I turned to Agent Barnovich. "Were you on duty here all night?"

"I was."

"Did you keep a log of everyone who entered the patient's room?"

"Of course."

"We'd better take a look at that."

Dr. Pryor interrupted. "I want it known that no cyanide in any form is kept at Pilgrim Memorial. We have no medical need for it here. If someone killed Fuchs, he brought the poison in with him."

"Let's go in your office and talk this over," I suggested. Pryor led the way to his office with Barnovich, the sheriff, and me following.

Within minutes Judd Francis joined us. "I can't believe this could happen," he said as he took a chair in the administrator's office. "Who even knew he was here?"

"We're working on that," Sheriff Lens told him. "First I'd better know the identity of this mystery patient."

"We don't know," Dr. Pryor insisted. "You'd better ask the FBI that question."

The sheriff turned to Agent Barnovich, who held up his hands. "I only know he was an important German, flown out of there last

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Saturday night. Maybe he was a defector, like Rudolph Hess."

"But no name?"

"No name, only Mr. Fuchs."

"Have you notified Washington of his death?"

"Of course. They're awaiting further news."

"What sort of news?" I asked.

"I haven't told them he may have been poisoned. I wanted to be sure of it first."

He handed me the FBI log and I ran my finger down the list of everyone who'd visited the patient after I'd left. Dr. Pryor had been in to see him at a few minutes before six. "I wanted him gone from here as soon as possible," the administrator told us. "His presence was disrupting the hospital routine, and since the entire matter was top secret we couldn't even profit from the publicity."

"Were you searched when you came to visit him?" I wondered, remembering the cursory inspection I'd received from the government agents.

"I was," Pryor acknowledged.

"So was I," Judd Francis told us. "I came by around eight o'clock and our patient seemed to be resting comfortably. His throat was dry and I had Nurse O'Toole bring him some ice water."

Sheriff Lens raised his eyebrows but Barnovich quickly said, "I tasted it, just like we tasted every scrap of food and drink that he had. And after I tasted it he took a couple of swallows himself. Nothing but water."

"No one else visited him?"

"The nurse came back to check his blood pressure around midnight but I was with her. He was half asleep then, and only wanted to know when he'd be out of here. I told him soon."

"Did you kill him?" Sheriff Lens asked the FBI man.

"Me? Of course not! What motive would I have?"

"He was an enemy. A German."

"But he was over here now. He'd left Germany."

"Perhaps that's why he was killed," Dr. Pryor speculated. "To keep him from revealing Nazi secrets to our side."

I smiled at the suggestion. "Do you think there's a Nazi agent at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital?"

"Well, somebody killed him."

I turned back to Barnovich. "Let's go over this again, step by step. I assume Fuchs was carefully searched when he arrived here."

"Right down to the skin," the FBI man said. "They put their own hospital garments on him here. And he had no possessions at all with him. His own clothes had been taken away in England, before he was flown here, to avoid any trace of his identity."

"And no one at Pilgrim Memorial had access to cyanide?"

"No one," Dr. Pryor insisted. "Of course, cyanide is a gas. The solid state is usually potassium cyanide. It can kill almost instantly if

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swallowed on a empty stomach, where the stomach acids quickly turn it back into a gas."

"Three seconds," I murmured, remembering what Fuchs had told me. "And no one was in the room when he died?"

Barnovich shook his head. "I was on a chair right outside his door. No one entered the room after my midnight visit. I went back outside and partly closed the door to his room."

"There are no other exit doors, of course, and no one was in the bathroom," Judd Francis said. "Before I realized he was dead I took his water glass to the sink to refill it. The bathroom was empty."

"We need to pin down the time of his death," I decided. "That might help."

Pryor nodded. "We'll have the preliminary autopsy report by morning."

Annabel was up with Samantha when I returned home and I told her what had happened. "Who do you think he was, Sam? Someone important enough he had to be murdered?"

"I have to see the autopsy report this morning and talk to some more of the staff."

"How could anyone have gotten into the room to poison him, and why would they want to?"

"That's what I need to find out."

"Why you, Sam? The FBI is on the case."

"The FBI is one of the suspects."

I tried to get a couple of hours' sleep, but I was up before eight and on my way back to Pilgrim Memorial. Judd Francis was waiting at my office with the autopsy results. "These are just preliminary, Sam, but it was cyanide as we suspected. He'd been dead about three to four hours when the coroner examined the body around five, which means he died somewhere between one and two, near as we can tell."

"Thanks, Judd." I glanced through the report and handed it back. "So the last people to enter his room were Agent Barnovich and Nurse O'Toole around midnight. I'll have to talk with them."

"Marcia doesn't come back on duty until noon, and the FBI is calling back its guard detail now that Fuchs is dead."

"I'd better try to catch Barnovich, then."

He was indeed preparing to leave. "No reason to stay," he told me.

"Isn't solving this murder reason enough?"

He sighed. "Look, Dr. Hawthorne, guarding this man was an FBI assignment. Solving his murder is something for the local police, unless you can show me that a federal law was violated."

He had me there. "Tell me about your midnight visit to the patient's bedside."

"Nurse O'Toole wanted to check his blood pressure and pulse before she went off duty. I guess that's the standard procedure here. I went in with her and stood by the bedside. She asked if he

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needed anything and he said no."

"He didn't request a sleeping pill or anything like that?"

"No, and she gave him nothing. We were only in there about two minutes and we left nothing behind. I said good night to her and went back to my chair."

"When were you due to be relieved?"

"Not till six A.M. I had the night shift."

"Will you be leaving today?"

He nodded. "Most of my men have already departed. I want to get some sleep first before I drive up to Boston."

"I'll see you before you go," I told him.

It was Sunday and I had no patients to see. By noon I arranged to be on Marcia O'Toole's floor when she came on duty. "I just heard what happened to Mr. Fuchs," she said when she saw me.

"That FBI man, Barnovich, says you two went in there at midnight and he was still alive."

She nodded, her brown hair bobbing. "I checked his signs and asked if he needed more water but he said he was fine. I expected he'd be gone by today, but not like this."

"Did Barnovich touch him or move him in any way?"

"Not while I was there. Why would an FBI agent want to kill him?"

"He probably wouldn't," I agreed, "but somehow he was poisoned, and I need to find out how."

I decided I had to read up on cyanide in the hospital's medical library, and I spent much of the afternoon there. Finally I knew what I had to do. I phoned Dr. Pryor and Sheriff Lens and asked them to gather the others in Pryor's office at five.

Judd Francis and Nurse O'Toole were there when I arrived, and Sheriff Lens soon entered with Agent Barnovich. "I have to get back to Boston," the agent told us, but I quieted him down.

"This will only take a few minutes, and I think you'll want it to complete your report."

"Go on," Dr. Pryor told me.

"Well, this was an especially baffling locked-room problem for me, because the room wasn't locked at all. The door to a hospital room is always unlocked, often open. The only question was how our mysterious patient obtained the poison that killed him. No cyanide or cyanide compounds are kept at the hospital, all food and drink was tasted before it entered the room, and by Agent Barnovich's testimony the patient was absolutely alone for an hour or two before he was poisoned. My first suspicion, of course, was that he might have lied. But even though Miss O'Toole had gone off duty there were other nurses on the floor. If he had left his chair and entered the room after midnight, someone might have noticed and reported it after the body was discovered."

"Thanks for believing me," Barnovich said with a trace of sarcasm.

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"Dr. Pryor and Judd Francis both visited the patient, as did Nurse O'Toole. Could they have poisoned him during their examinations, perhaps with the tip of a thermometer inserted into his mouth to take his temperature? No, because cyanide, you'll remember, kills instantly. And none of them visited him after midnight, when Barnovich and O'Toole both swear the patient was alive and talking. Where does that leave us? Is there anyone who was in that room between the hours of one and two when Fuchs died instantly from cyanide poisoning? Most especially, was anyone in there who had access to the poison? I asked myself that, and I saw the only possible answer. The victim himself!"

"He had no cyanide," Barnovich insisted.

"But he did at one point. I spoke to him yesterday about how he got here. He wouldn't reveal his name, but he'd fallen out of favor with Hitler, who gave him two choices—a trial for treason or a cyanide capsule and a hero's funeral. He chose cyanide and had the capsule in his hand when a friend whisked him away to a waiting aircraft. He had the tiny capsule in his hand!"

"Not when he arrived here," Barnovich insisted. "And he sure didn't swallow it or he'd have been dead."

"I spent the afternoon at the library, reading books about cyanide poisoning. There were accounts of spies and high-ranking military officials who preferred suicide to capture and torture. One method was to carry a small cyanide capsule inside a hollow false tooth. Even if fettered, the prisoner could work the capsule free with his tongue and bite or swallow it."

Barnovich's mouth dropped open. "Do you think that's what happened?"

"There's no other explanation. He had the cyanide and he brought it with him. The man named Fuchs killed himself."

"If Doc says it, I'm satisfied," Sheriff Lens decided. "Far as I'm concerned, the case is closed."

Dr. Pryor nodded. "I agree."

I went back to my office and phoned April at home to tell her it was over. "That's good," she said. "With this damp weather we're bound to start getting some flu cases."

"I'll be in tomorrow morning for the entire day."

But there was one thing I had to do first. I went back into the hospital and sought out Marcia O'Toole. I found her without difficulty, caring for an elderly patient. She smiled when she saw me. "I'm so glad you were able to wind that business up. This place hadn't been the same since he arrived."

"Is there someplace we can talk, Marcia?"

"Why—I guess we could use the nurses' lounge for a few minutes. What is it?"

I waited till we were alone before I answered. Then I looked her in the eye and asked, "Why did you poison Fuchs?"

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For a moment she didn't answer. Perhaps she was weighing her options. Then she said, quite softly, "Because my brother was killed in North Africa." There were tears in her eyes. "How did you know?"

"There was no cyanide here at the hospital. It had to come from outside, and my explanation of the false tooth seemed the most likely. Fuchs couldn't have known what sort of welcome awaited him here, so he kept the cyanide capsule and secreted it in a hollow tooth he wore for just that purpose. If we'd charged him with being a war criminal he'd have had a way out."

"But he wasn't charged with anything! The rumor was he'd be meeting the President, to be treated as some sort of hero."

"Hardly! I'm sure he would have been held as a prisoner of war."

"And then released at the end of the war! I wanted someone to pay for my brother. I wanted him to pay. The man I killed was Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps."

"I know. I think others in the hospital must have known too. The code name they gave him was Fuchs, the German word for Fox. Rommel was well known in North Africa as the Desert Fox." Remembering my conversation with him, I added, "I think he found a bit of humor in the code name."

"How did you know it was me?" she asked again.

"I came in to see him the other day and you were washing him and brushing his teeth. That was when you found the hidden capsule. You must have guessed what it was and you kept it. He was still a bit drowsy then and probably didn't even realize you'd taken it. Once I suspected you of having the cyanide, I only had to determine how you could have managed to kill him with it. Then I remembered that Judd Francis asked you to bring him a glass of ice water last evening."

"Agent Barnovich tasted it as he always did. And Fuchs drank some right away."

"They tasted the water but not the ice cubes. You'd frozen that tiny capsule inside a cube of ice. When the ice melted during the night, the capsule was left floating there. Fuchs drank the rest of the water during the night and probably never noticed the capsule in the dark. By the time he realized it he was seconds from death."

"What will you do now?" she asked. Her breath was coming fast.

"I don't know," I admitted. "If it was Rommel, in a sense he was a casualty of the African campaign. It was as if your brother had shot him dead. Deaths in battle are not considered murder—though sometimes I think they should be."

Within a month Marcia O'Toole left the hospital and moved out of Northmont. I never saw her again. The death of Mr. Fuchs at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital attracted no attention at all. Accounts of Rommel's death were published after the war, and all had him swallowing the cyanide capsule while in the car with his friend. If he made it all the way to Northmont with his capsule, no one ever admitted it. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

MOTIVE

by Yokoyama Hideo

Translated from the Japanese by Beth Cary.

After a dozen years as a newspaper reporter, Yokoyama Hideo began writing manga stories, children's books, novels based on actual incidents, and mysteries. The following tale won the Mystery Writers of Japan award for best short story in 2000. Since then, several of Yokoyama's wildly popular novels, including *Half a Confession*, *Climbers High*, and *Sea Without Exit* have been turned into film and TV productions. ●

1.

It was after 10 A.M. when the wind came up.

There was none of the year-end bustle in the lobby of the prefectural hospital. There were no patients waiting for prescriptions, no visitors to cheer the sick, no nurses rushing by in a whirlwind. It was always like this here. In this hospital that overlooked the seacoast, where the windows were fitted with bars, even air and time were sequestered.

This is the last time I'll be here this year, Kaise Masayuki thought as he filled in his personal information and the date on the visitors' list: J Prefecture Police Headquarters, Police Affairs Department, Planning and Investigation Officer. Superintendent. Age 44.

And he had a mountain of work to complete before the end of the year in order to prepare for next spring's administrative reforms.

Kaise's footsteps echoed as he walked across the lobby and climbed the stairs. He showed his visitor's card at the reception area in front of the locked ward. A muscled young male nurse unlocked the door and pushed open the barred security gate. Kaise continued down the hallway, thinking only of walking. Against the wall was one patient. Then another. Two people sat on the floor. Others stood around, squatted, or were doubled over. All of them

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wore vacant expressions.

His father was in the recreation room, where he sat cross-legged, unkempt, facing the wall. His eyes, half closed beneath the sleep caked in the corners, were fixed on one point of the tatami. His medicine was working. The medication had increased over the years, robbing his father, one by one, of words, facial expressions, and characteristic habits. Kaise hadn't seen him for a month, but it might have been simply the drab color of his sweater that made his back seem so shrunken. He looked like a pile of dirt that could crumble away at any minute.

Kaise's emotions nearly overwhelmed him.

"Old man, I've come to see you," he said gruffly as he sat down beside his father.

He pulled out a bag of rice crackers, cut it open, and held it in front of his father's expressionless face.

"You like these, don't you?"

". . ."

"You eating your meals all right?"

". . ."

Kaise sighed. He hadn't heard his father's voice for several years.

His father had been held up as a model beat police officer. He had started as a messenger boy in the department during the chaotic postwar period. His diligence was rewarded, and he was promoted to policeman. Most of his forty years on the force had been spent in local or residential police boxes. Hard-working. Simple. Courteous. Wherever he went he was liked by the citizens he served. But after he reached mandatory retirement age, and his wife died, he began to fall apart.

Kaise gazed at his father's wrinkled profile.

My old man fell in the line of duty.

He thought that he had noticed the first signs of his father's illness before his mother died. As mandatory retirement drew near, his father became taciturn and often brooded all day long. Being a police officer was not merely an occupation for his father, it was his life. When he took off his uniform, his life had ceased.

"My goodness." A nurse with a youthful face and a too-cheerful voice stared at Kaise.

"I'm Kaise. My father is always . . ."

"So it is you! I thought you looked alike."

The nametag at her chest read, "Yagi Akane." This was the young woman who had sent him a postcard saying she was the new nurse assigned to his father. "Please come visit occasionally." She could have written just that. But she must have thought it sounded too pushy, and had included "I know you must be busy" three times in her gentle note.

"Please stay awhile!" She sounded overjoyed. She slid down onto the tatami on both knees and took his father's hands, as white as

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wax, and shook them up and down. "Isn't it wonderful that your son has come?"

Suddenly, his father uttered, "Yah." Startled, Kaise looked at his father's face.

"Yes, that's right, you're happy, aren't you?"

He's happy? Kaise was perplexed by Akane's interpretation. He saw no change in his father's face. *Was he really happy?*

"Nurse . . ."

Just when Kaise started to speak, his chest pocket vibrated.

"Crap. They catch me no matter where I am."

Kaise grabbed his cell phone and turned his back on Akane, who was no longer smiling.

"I'm sorry to bother you on your day off," a loud voice said into his ear. It was Subsection Chief Ioka from Headquarters, the Police Affairs Section. He was Kaise's immediate subordinate. "We have a problem. The department chief asks that you come in right away. . . ."

"What's happened?"

"Well . . ." Ioka hesitated. "Sorry for the extra trouble, but please could you call back on a land line?"

Kaise felt uneasy. When he stood up, Akane looked as if she was about to cry.

"I'll be right back," he said to his father, and he left the recreation room. He was reluctant to use the telephone in the nurses' station. He retraced his steps back along the hallway, had the male nurse unlock the door, and went to the public phone in the open ward.

He punched the buttons to dial the internal line of the chief of police affairs. Department Chief Kosuga answered immediately.

"It's Kaise. What's happened?"

Kosuga hesitated before he answered.

"The police ID notebooks are gone."

"What?"

"Thirty of them. Thirty officers' identification documents that were stored together for safekeeping have been stolen."

Kaise stopped breathing.

"I've called a meeting of department heads. Get back to headquarters immediately and come directly to the conference room," Kosuga ordered hurriedly. Before he hung up, he spat out the words, "Your idea seems to have backfired."

Kaise froze.

The collective storage was hit. . . .

They had implemented a new system aimed at preventing the loss of police IDs—the passport-like books police officers flashed to show they were part of the police force. Previously, police officers had been obliged to carry their IDs on duty as well as off. The recent revision of that regulation had allowed the head of each section to be entrusted with the safekeeping of subordinates' IDs during off-duty hours. That meant that officers who were finished with

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their workday no longer carried their IDs home with them. When they left their offices, they entrusted them to their respective departments.

Kaise was the one who had proposed this plan.

After he had overcome the opposition of the Criminal Investigation Department, a test of his plan was begun by the administrative section as well as by three police stations, including U Station. Zero missing identification documents. That was supposed to be the result. But now . . .

This measure which was to have eliminated the loss of the valuable IDs had resulted in an unprecedented large-scale burglary.

"Your plan seems to have backfired."

Kosuga's comment stung anew. It fit with the atmosphere swirling around at police headquarters at the moment.

Kaise headed toward the door, his pace quickening. He felt a searing pain at his temple.

Akane was at the stairway landing. She stared at Kaise reproachfully, her chin buried in the mountain of sheets she carried.

"I'll come again." It was all he could do to mutter the words.

Passing through the doors, his cheeks slapped by the wind off the pale ocean, Kaise's only thought was of his route back to headquarters.

2.

The seacoast road was empty, but the national highway leading to the city was congested. He escaped onto back roads, but even so it took nearly an hour for him to reach the Headquarters building in the government-offices area of town. It was nearly noon.

"Use the stairs to go up or down one or two floors." These words posted on the wall in past days of energy conservation had at some point transformed into a slogan urging the staff to exercise more. Kaise, who had no problem with excess weight, adhered to this sign because the indicator lights for the elevators were hovering around the seventh and eighth floors.

Third floor. Police Affairs Department. Calming his breathing, Kaise pushed the door open. All of the staff turned toward him, but most quickly averted their eyes or looked down. Even his direct subordinate, Subsection Chief Ioka, behaved so. Handing Kaise a three-page document outlining the case, Ioka told him, "To the conference room," in a low voice. He then fled back to his desk and buried his face in a pile of papers. Was he being considerate of Kaise's feelings? Or was he trying to avoid being implicated? No, his posture suggested something else. There was a difference in the heat that would be felt by Kaise, who had proposed the collective storage of the IDs, and Ioka, who had merely prepared the paperwork as ordered.

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Kaise left the section office.

The conference room was on the eighth floor. Though the elevator had just arrived, Kaise once again chose the stairs. He couldn't go into a meeting of the top-level department heads with a blank mind. He wanted a bit of time to think about the situation, to deliberate and consider remedial measures. . . . As he moved his feet, relying on the handrail of the stairs, Kaise's eyes and brain pored over the document Ioka had given him.

"Location of incident: U Station, first floor."

U Station had been collecting and storing the IDs by floor. The first floor housed the Police Affairs Section and the Traffic Section. It was those IDs that had been taken.

"Case summary."

Yesterday, just after five P.M., the officer in charge of storing the IDs on the first floor began gathering the thirty documents belonging to the staff of the Police Affairs Section and the Traffic Section. He placed them in the safe and locked it. The precinct went into night-shift mode, during which time there was no suspicious occurrence. At 7:45 the following morning, when the officer in charge of storage reported to duty and opened the safe, all the IDs had disappeared.

What the hell? Kaise was irritated. He felt as if he were reading a newspaper account of office vandalism. It was too simple. Why wasn't there more precise documentation? Was this really something that had occurred in a police station?

He turned the page.

"The Criminal Investigation Department and Security Department begin secret investigation. . . . Three investigators enter U Station to take statements from those connected to the station in the fifth-floor physical training room."

As a matter of course, they were pursuing the possibility of an inside job.

Here was the reality: The large-scale theft of police IDs—this unprecedented scandal—would shake the organization to its core. Kaise was treading up the stairs to the conference room as if he were about to be tried as a war criminal.

He envisioned the inside of U Station in his increasingly throbbing head. The ground level had an open floor plan. To the left of the entry was the Traffic Section, with the Police Affairs Section beyond. There were no walls or doors between the two sections, allowing for free access. The storage safe was in the wall behind the Police Affairs Section.

Could an outsider have done it?

Under normal circumstances, that would be difficult. The station went into night-duty mode at 5:15 P.M. The office for the night-duty staff was in a corner of the Traffic Section. There were two entrances to the station: the front entrance and the back door. Anyone entering from either doorway would be seen by the night-

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duty officers. Moreover, the key to the storage safe in question was hung on the wall directly facing the duty staff. To steal the key brazenly and pass through the night-duty office and enter the Police Affairs Section—that would be impossible. There was no way it could be done.

No, don't make simplistic assumptions.

U Station's night-duty officers numbered thirteen. By shortly after 10 P.M. nearly half of them, the "early sleep group," would be asleep. If the theft had occurred during that time, the station would have been short-handed. The night-duty chief and the radio operator would have been at their seats, but even that wasn't absolute. Should a drunken brawl cause several people to be taken into custody, the officers might leave their seats to assist in their detainment. If the thief chose that time . . .

If it was an outside job, who might it be?

Extremists. Cultists. Those were the types that first came to mind. A deranged police buff was also someone to watch out for. There had been cases in the past in which police boxes had been targeted for the theft of guns and police IDs. Disgruntled former police officers also needed to be kept in mind. If the thief had worked at U Station, he would be familiar with internal procedure. It was also necessary to investigate people who could enter the station without raising suspicions. Someone in an extra-governmental agency. Newspaper reporters. Restaurant delivery staff. Town drunks . . .

Kaise pressed a finger to the bridge of his nose. An infinite number of possibilities came to his mind.

As he passed the landing on the sixth floor, he forced himself to shift his thinking.

What about an inside job?

There was no question that the situation allowed for this. Anyone who worked at U Station could have done it. Most obviously, it could be last night's night-duty staff.

Kaise returned his eyes to the report. The names of the thirteen night-duty officers were listed. The officer in charge of the night-duty staff was Masukawa Takashi, Assistant Police Inspector, First Criminal Investigation Section, Burglary Section Chief.

Masukawa . . .

His rugged face loomed up in Kaise's mind. He had entered the force one year ahead of Kaise. Kaise had never spoken to Masukawa, but according to rumor, he was quite the tough guy. He was known as a member of the judo team when he was young. About five years ago, his rough handling of suspects had nearly led to a lawsuit.

What disturbed Kaise more than Masukawa's reputation was finding out that the officer in charge of last night's night duty was from the Criminal Investigation side. He couldn't help but recall

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the furor of six months ago. The opposition of the Criminal Investigation Department to his proposal to store the IDs all together had been virulent.

"What do you mean by taking away the very soul of the police officer!"

"Do you mean to turn police officers into mere salary earners?!"

"Police officers are police officers twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year!"

Kaise had not pulled back. He had felt he could not retreat.

Wasn't being a police officer an occupation?

Of course, it was not the same type of occupation as working for a private enterprise that pursues profits. Yet in so far as one labored, received compensation, and made a living in that manner, it was certainly an occupation. Saying it was a "way of life" or a "divine calling" could not change that fact. And the times had surely changed. It was still an occupation worth doing. An occupation that engaged one's spirit of service. But it shouldn't matter if there was an increasing number of police officers imbued with a more practical awareness of the job as long as they worked with diligence.

He couldn't give in on this matter. That was his thought. Having been born and raised as the "local policeman's kid" and proud of his father, Kaise had chosen to become a second-generation police officer. But with the onset of his father's illness, he had come to look at his own organization with sober eyes. To a certain extent this business of the police IDs was a battle to avenge his father, who had fallen in the line of duty.

Naturally, he did not speak of this. He had made a decisive proposal to prevent the loss of the IDs, and faced with the opposition of the Criminal Investigation Department, he had battled without yielding and forcibly pushed for a test case. However . . .

What if the opposition of the Criminal Investigation Department was much more deeply rooted than Kaise had imagined?

The storage-safe key was hung on the wall directly across from the night-duty officer. Even if some of the night-duty staff left to go outside the station, the officer in charge was always in front of the key.

What kind of guy was Masukawa Takashi?

The eighth floor. The door to the conference room was closed tight.

Kaise took a deep breath. It was not only from fear. He also felt the tension of stepping into an arena for confrontation.

3.

Inside the conference room, with its expansive view of the far-off horizon, Headquarters Department Head Aoyama and heads of the departments of Police Affairs, Criminal Investigation, Community Safety, Traffic, and Security were seated around an oval table with

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solemn expressions. In chairs behind them sat the section chiefs, their hands rapidly jotting down notes.

Kaise stood erect against the wall.

No words of abuse or sarcasm were aimed at him. What greeted Kaise's entry into the room were cold glances from the executive officials. It was their way of saying that the root cause of this scandal was this man. No one made any further acknowledgment of Kaise's presence.

Except for one person, Kaise's superior, Police Affairs Department Head Kamoike, who intentionally clicked his tongue. Was he indicating to the Headquarters Department Head that he hadn't been enthusiastic about the collective storage of the police IDs?

Police Affairs Section Chief Kosuga, who had no doubt been forced to explain the circumstances in place of the absent Kaise, still had a flushed face. The gaze he directed at Kaise said, "You menace."

His hooked nose beaded with sweat, the chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, Yamanouchi, spat out in a hushed voice, "The idiot."

The meeting proceeded while Kaise remained standing against the wall. The course of action for the investigation had already been determined, but the biggest headache, how to deal with the mass media, was yet to be decided.

Should this incident be announced to the press? Or should it be kept quiet?

The majority opinion was that there was no choice but to make an announcement. Thirty police IDs had been stolen—too large a number to be kept hidden. If, while the matter was concealed, the IDs were misused, the fallout would be enormous. Even if nothing untoward happened, should the incident be exposed later on, there would be no way to avoid incurring blame for a cover-up.

Yet, as thirty IDs was such a large number, there was a sense that the incident shouldn't be so readily publicized. It was an unheard-of scandal. Trust in the prefectural police would plummet drastically. Flitting inside the heads of all of the department heads was the spector of oversized newspaper headlines assailing the incompetence of the police.

Sighs filled the conference room.

"How about delaying the announcement until the papers are almost ready to go to press? The articles would be smaller then."

"That wouldn't help. The story is just too big. If we try to play gimmicks, they'll get upset and continue writing about it for weeks."

"At a time like this, it's best to appear sincere. The collective storage was still in the test stage. We will review it. The only thing we can do is to say that and bow our heads in apology."

Kaise was assaulted by the sensation that his innards were being eaten up.

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This incident was going to become news. It would be broadcast on television. He was already dead within the organization. When the story broke, millions of citizens would also ridicule the collective storage system. Those within the force would heartlessly stomp on Kaise's feelings. Sympathy. Pity. Ridicule. Abuse.

But he wasn't thinking only of self-protection. He felt anger and chagrin. Any police officer understood the spell of the police IDs. Even when he is drinking with a friend or on a family outing, there is a moment when the police officer's hand reaches for his breast pocket. If he loses his ID, it is noted as a red mark in his file, and this negative evaluation stays with him as long as he is a police officer. It can affect whether he passes the promotion tests.

It was clear that the collective storage system had taken a hit. On the surface, it had backfired. But the system itself was not necessarily defective, Kaise thought. If it was an inside job. there was no way to have prevented it. If someone on the inside wanted to, he could even take out guns and bullets from the arms safe. It wasn't the system that was bad. What was bad was . . .

At that instant, the name Masukawa passed across Kaise's brain. *I can't die like this,* he thought. Kaise clenched his teeth and fists.

Faces with dubious expressions turned toward him as one. Several cast sharply piercing gazes at him.

Headquarters Department Head Aoyama stretched his neck.

"What is it?"

Kaise swallowed the dryness at the back of his throat. His thoughts were in disarray. An inside crime. Retaliation. Blocking the news conference. Recovery of the IDs. . . . Speculation and desire confused his mind.

"What is it? If you have an opinion, give it."

"Yes, sir." Kaise took a step forward. His brain exerted itself to expand on a quickly formed idea. "As long as we have the suspicion that it might be an inside crime, I think it would be prudent to wait until the internal investigation has been completed before announcing it to the press."

"Why is that?"

"I think it is hardly likely that an insider would have stolen the IDs for the purpose of misusing them. If it is a case of malicious mischief or harassment, it is possible that the IDs may be returned quite soon."

Aoyama leaned forward. "The IDs may be returned? What makes you think so?"

"Well . . ." He felt that he was getting into deep water. Wasn't he just spinning a fantastic yarn to cover his shame? Despite his dread, Kaise couldn't stop his words. "The perpetrator may have already achieved his aim by causing such a disruption. He may become scared and return the IDs. That is a possibility."

Aoyama gazed into space. The other senior officials also mulled this over.

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But Yamanouchi, the Criminal Investigation Department Head, responded differently.

"Mischief or harassment . . . Why would someone in the police do that?"

"That would be . . ." Kaise couldn't avoid saying it. He braced himself. "The aim may be to upset the agency, or to bring down a certain person. . . ."

"Who do you mean?" Yamanouchi shouted. He had sniffed out the scent of Kaise's reference to the feud between the Criminal Investigation Department and the Police Affairs Department. "Who's bringing down who? Just say it!"

Kaise turned silent. It was not because he feared this tirade. Yamanouchi's reaction had raised Kaise's suspicions to another level. A crime committed by someone in the Criminal Investigation Department. It might be that Yamanouchi was concerned about this in a corner of his mind. The collective storage of notebooks was not the only seed of discord between the Police Affairs Department and the Criminal Investigation Department. Last spring's personnel change was a case in point. The previous Police Affairs Department Chief had sidelined Yamanouchi's right-hand man, the chief of the First Criminal Investigation Section, to the post of Counselor of the Traffic Department. The official reason given was "to allow a rest" for the section chief, who was in poor health and prone to taking days off. But the department chief's intent was elsewhere. His own change of posting to Headquarters had been decided and he had, to use his words, "slammed the swollen-headed Criminal Investigation Department with a parting gift."

J Prefectural Police historically had a strong Criminal Investigation Department. The head of the First Criminal Investigation Section, the core of the department, had been removed. It was not hard to imagine that there were many in the investigation field who harbored feelings of humiliation and anger. With this background of resentment toward the Police Affairs Department, the further antagonism caused by the collective storage system may have triggered this case. The theory made sense. It was suspicious that the incident had occurred during the test phase. The time to crush the effort was now, its opponents would think.

But perhaps it wasn't a concerted effort. What if it was just one individual? There were all manner of types in the organization. If someone had expanded without limit his hatred toward the Police Affairs Department or had been fired up with righteous indignation and acted out his anger, then . . .

"Why are you keeping silent? Say something!" Pushing his hooked nose forward, Yamanouchi yelled, "Or are you making irresponsible comments because you want to evade your responsibility?"

"No, that is not it."

"Then make it clear. What makes you think it's an inside job?

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Who's bringing down who? Just say it."

"I don't know," Kaise said, sensing he was walking a tightrope. "I am saying that if it is an internal matter, then there is the possibility that the IDs will be returned. That is what I am saying."

"Don't play around—"

As Yamanouchi suddenly stood up, Headquarters Department Head Aoyama motioned to restrain him.

"It's worth considering. If the IDs are returned, everything will turn out all right. . . ."

Aoyama crossed his arms across his chest. There was a thin sheen of perspiration on his forehead, which looked like a plastic doll's, but it must have been in full motion inside. Was it disadvantageous or advantageous to do as Kaise said?

The conference room became steeped in silence. Every man was waiting for the next word from the Headquarters department head.

The plastic forehead turned around.

"How long will it take to do the internal investigation?"

The Internal Investigations Head pushed back his chair and stood up. "We need at least two days."

Feeling Yamanouchi's fierce gaze, Kaise stood up straighter. *I beg of you,* he thought to himself.

"We'll delay the press announcement until the day after tomorrow," Aoyama said.

4.

Kaise put in a call to his home in the police housing unit to say that he would be late getting home and left the prefectural police headquarters by car.

It was about a fifteen-minute trip to U Station. It was after 4:30, and already the sky was turning dusky. Early Christmas decorations highlighted the desolation of the local shopping street, whose customers had been lured away by the large-scale shops.

Kaise let out a heavy breath.

A two-day suspended sentence—

He had spoken with bravado. He had gained some time. But there were only two days to find the culprit and retrieve the IDs. Was that even possible?

Next to him on the passenger seat was a file. Masukawa Takashi, U Station, First Criminal Investigation Section, Chief of Burglary. Assistant Police Inspector. Age 45. Commendations received: 21. Residence: family dormitory, with wife and two daughters.

It was hard to feel the reality of this. He was suspecting a man he had never even talked to. A feud. Righteous indignation. Retaliation. Those words wouldn't string together in one line now that the excitement had died down. It just so happened that someone in the Criminal Investigation Section was the duty officer in charge last night. Wasn't he just trying to force this coincidence into a result?

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Stop it!

For Kaise, now, there was only Masukawa. He had thrown out the possibility of it being an outside crime. Work like that—like finding a needle on the beach—was best left to the tactics of the Criminal Investigation and Security departments. Even for Internal Investigations, it was going to be a major task to investigate the thirteen night-duty staff in merely two days. For the time being, he would fix on Masukawa. He had to believe that Masukawa had a motive.

But it was doubtful if he could approach Masukawa. Internal investigations were under the sole authority of the Internal Investigations office. Even if he asserted that he was the original proponent of the collective storage of IDs, he would not be permitted to supercede the investigators and question anyone. Neither could he hope for backup from the Police Affairs Department. "Write up a text for the news conference." This was the only directive given Kaise by Department Head Kamoike after the meeting.

I'll just have to use guerilla tactics. . . .

Kaise turned the steering wheel and drove into the U Station parking lot. Lights were on in the fifth-floor exercise room. It appeared that the questioning by the investigators was still in progress.

He had expected the station to be in a tumult, but instead, it was quiet. There were only a few people in the Traffic Section just inside the door; and in the Police Affairs Section farther in, he saw only Yamazaki Tomoyo, a civil-service staff member, and one young officer of the section.

I'm in luck, Kaise thought.

Tomoyo was an old-timer at U Station. She had been there for over thirty years, and during that time had given birth to three children, two of whom were now adults. Kaise himself had been posted to U Station for two years while he was a policeman. He might be able to get quite of bit of information out of Tomoyo.

"Hello, it's been quite awhile."

"Oh, hello, Mr. Kaise." Tomoyo clapped her hands in joy. But realizing immediately why his nostalgic face had appeared before her, she furrowed her brow. "It's a terrible situation."

"Yes."

"Who could have done it?"

Her way of saying "who" troubled him. "Who do you think it could be, Mrs. Yamazaki?"

"I don't know. . . . The only certain thing is that it wasn't me." Tomoyo's expression had switched back to a smile.

Kaise wanted to ask about Masukawa, but it was difficult to broach the subject. He turned his eyes toward the storage safe at the wall. It was just about at Kaise's eye-level. It was a locker-type model, so the steel plates were as thick as commercially available heat-resistant safes. There was a light dusting of powder around the handle.

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If the culprit is a detective, he would hardly leave any fingerprints. . . .

"Mr. Kaise, have a seat. We're just having some tea."

Turning around at Tomoyo's voice, Kaise noticed a young officer standing erect holding a tray of tea cups. This policeman, who gave his name as Kamiya Jun'ichi, with his bright eyes and lack of sophistication, made Kaise think of Yagi Akane at his father's hospital.

"Young Kamiya has an excellent record. Some day he'll become important like you, Mr. Kaise." Having flattered both Kaise and Kamiya, Tomoyo's face suddenly clouded over. "Mr. Kaise, does this mean that our section is under suspicion?"

Since morning, four members of the Police Affairs Section had been called to the exercise room to be questioned by the investigators. It seemed that Tomoyo was trying to get information about Headquarters from Kaise.

"I don't think your section is under particular suspicion. They're trying to clear all the possibilities."

His answer satisfied Tomoyo, but Kaise was troubled by the new pebble of doubt that had been thrown into the pond.

Was it a member of the Police Affairs Section?

Of course, this was a possibility. It wasn't just last night's night-duty staff who would be under suspicion internally. The staff of the Police Affairs Section was in charge of the storage safe. They were solid suspects as well. His thinking was muddled after all, not to have thought of such an obvious prospect. Even though he, being with Police Affairs at Headquarters, was not in the same jurisdiction as U Station, they were all still part of the same Police Affairs Section. Somewhere in his mind he may have felt that he wanted to avoid suspecting those within his own section.

Given the circumstances, a member of the Police Affairs Section could have done it. It would be easiest for the person in charge of storing the IDs to commit the crime. Pretending to place the documents into the storage safe, he could actually lock up the empty safe. It would be as easy as fooling children to take the IDs in such a way.

He didn't have to look at the files. The first-floor storage officer was "Army Sergeant." Anyone who didn't recognize this nickname was an imposter in the department.

Ōwada Tōru, Charge Officer, Police Affairs Section, U Station. Police Sergeant. Age 59. Nicknamed "Army Sergeant" or "Top Sergeant," he was the most rigid man in J Prefectural Police Agency.

He was an extreme stickler about rules and regulations. He would yell at officers if he thought their way of saluting wasn't up to par. If he found that the sleeping room was dirty, he would call back officers who had returned to the dormitory and order them to clean up the room. He was said to have slapped a young officer for wearing his police cap at an angle. He was also said to have insisted to the station chief that he move his car, as it wasn't parked in

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his designated space. He was seen as an annoyance by both his superiors and those lower in rank. But, as they were in the police force, which places a high value on discipline, those around him thought it a necessary evil to have such a person. This was the uncomfortable narrow niche occupied by Ōwada.

Kaise had for just one year been put through his paces where Ōwada was stationed. It was while he was posted at a police box. Kaise was not directly under Ōwada's supervision, but that didn't matter to the sergeant. "Your father was a great policeman," he told Kaise at every opportunity. And Kaise couldn't stand it.

However . . . if Ōwada was the culprit, it was the end of the police force, Kaise thought.

He may have gone too far at times, but Ōwada had an upright streak. Heeding the rules and regulations was his abiding concern, even to the point of snapping at superiors without flinching. If Ōwada had gone beyond violating regulations to commit a theft, Kaise wouldn't be the only one to think that the institution of the police was in danger of collapse.

Ōwada was facing mandatory retirement in the spring. But after the turn of the year, he would be promoted one rank to acknowledge his many years of service, and the normal practice was then to take accumulated leave before unofficial notification of his next assignment. That meant his actual remaining time on duty was less than one month.

Something crossed Kaise's mind.

"Mrs. Yamazaki, how has Police Sergeant Ōwada been recently?"

"What do you mean, how? He's just the same as usual." So saying, Tomoyo widened her eyes. "You can't be suspecting Mr. Ōwada, can you?"

"No . . ."

It wasn't that he suspected him. Yet he was concerned about the retirement of "Army Sergeant."

It was not only his father's case. Kaise had seen many instances of the inner wavering of policemen whose countdown to retirement had begun. Those who were constantly harping at others could become quiet, while those who were taciturn became voluble. There were those who became awfully tearful. Those who made unbelievably foolish mistakes. Those who sat staring out the window. . . .

For forty years, they had watched over society and had been watched by society. The liberation from the burden of the uniform. At the same time, the sense of nothingness that surges toward them. . . .

In most cases, it was a passing phase. The feeling no doubt gradually fades as one breathes the new air of the private company where one is reemployed, or becomes busy taking care of grandchildren, or engages in long-awaited hobbies. However, there are only a few who can imagine themselves as anything other than

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police officers before they retire. That was why, Kaise thought, the "season of the devil" exists just before retirement.

What was the case with Ōwada? Was there no hint of wavering, as Tomoyo said? In this police agency, which had strict controls perforce, what was going through the mind of this old charge officer, who had bound himself and others hand and foot with rules and regulations, as he faced retirement?

If Ōwada was the culprit, it spelt the end of integrity for the police agency. As he ruminated over this, Kaise was overtaken by the thought that he had discovered a new suspect. It was not suspicion toward Ōwada personally. It was suspicion toward the transition that had so brutally destroyed his father.

"Officer Kamiya!"

Kaise ducked his head at the loud voice from behind. He knew without turning around. This voice was. . . .

Ōwada stood there.

Kaise tensed as he stood up. "Hello, I'm afraid it's been a long time."

Ōwada bowed scrupulously to the younger superintendent from Headquarters. Having done so, he paid no further attention to Kaise as he shouted at Kamiya that the table was dirty. Bring the cleaning cloth. Wring it well. Wipe the table twice.

The eyes that glared like a demon-god statue were just as Kaise had remembered, but Ōwada's hair and eyebrows were sprinkled with white, and Kaise couldn't help but look with shock at the deep wrinkles in his cheeks. The nickname "Army Sergeant" had been based in the main on his burly appearance, but seeing him after many years made Kaise realize that he had become an aging soldier.

When he had checked Kamiya's work, Ōwada went to his own desk to prepare to leave.

Kaise looked at his watch. It was 5:15.

He should hear what Ōwada had to say, he thought. But he had trouble finding a way to approach him. His expressions were hard to read, but he could tell that he was glum, perhaps angry at the investigators' questioning.

As Kaise hesitated, Ōwada hoisted his black shoulder bag onto his shoulder.

Making up his mind, Kaise stepped toward him.

"Mr. Ōwada, is the questioning . . ."

Ōwada raised his voice to intercept him. "Yesterday, at five-twenty P.M., I placed thirty ID documents into the storage safe and locked it up! This morning at seven forty-five A.M., I unlocked and inspected the inside of the safe to confirm that all thirty IDs were gone. Immediately I made telephone contact with the related departments—that is all!"

Kaise was daunted by this display. He understood why Ōwada was the first to be released from the investigators' questioning. There was no one in the entire organization who could grill as a

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suspect this man who seemed made of steel and who had regulated himself for forty years.

"I will take my leave now!" Once again Ōwada bowed precisely and left Kaise's side.

Wavering . . . season of the devil. . . . All his misgivings evaporated. To an astonishing degree, Ōwada still remained the "Army Sergeant."

His eyes followed Ōwada as he exited the building. It would be easy to carry thirty ID documents in that shoulder bag, Kaise thought grudgingly.

5.

He continued to wait for Masukawa Takashi.

It was past six o'clock. Yamazaki Tomoyo and police officer Kamiya had gone home, leaving Kaise alone in the Police Affairs Section. He asked the night-duty staff to order a delivery of a bowl of Chinese noodles. He thought of gathering information if there was anyone he knew, but unfortunately there was no one he recognized that night. The night-duty staff in the Traffic Section occasionally looked over suspiciously and whispered to each other, foreheads together.

As he slurped his noodles, Kaise kept watch on the stairway.

His impatience at the internal investigators increased. It would be helpful if they found the culprit, but his expectations were low. Those being questioned were the seventeen night-duty staff and Police Affairs Section officers from last night. Six of them, including Ōwada, had gone home, but there were eleven still left. How thoroughly could only three investigators conduct the questioning?

Crap, they're still not done.

Kaise sank into the couch.

The atmosphere of the "Army Sergeant" still lingered. Not a speck of dust littered the floor. The desk was tidied. Its surface brightly reflected the light from the fluorescent bulbs. He recalled Officer Kamiya working hard to dust it with the dustcloth. And shouting at him from behind . . .

Just then an unpleasant thought crossed his mind.

There must be many who detested Ōwada. Hatred aimed at Ōwada, not at the Police Affairs Section. Could that turn into a motive?

Perhaps so. By stealing the IDs, the culprit could have put Ōwada, the one responsible for storage, into a tight corner. It could have been done to embarrass him, by aiming at this time just before he was to retire.

His line of thought was interrupted.

He heard footsteps on the stairs. The first person . . . the second person . . . the third person was Masukawa. His cheekbones jutted out. His eyes pierced like those of a bird of prey. Kaise knew this much from the file photograph, but what he observed now was the heavy build of a rugby player.

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Kaise ran after him. He caught up with him at the back entrance.

"Section Chief Masukawa."

The thick neck turned the head around.

"I'm Kaise, from Headquarters, Police Affairs Section."

"Eh? Oh, yes. I know. I know." Masukawa shook his head with obvious feigned innocence.

"Sorry to bother you when you're tired, but I'd like to ask you some questions." Kaise spoke humbly. He was two grades higher, but Masukawa had entered the agency a year earlier. Moreover, it was practically the first time they had met.

"I spoke to the investigator. Plenty."

"I realize that. But . . ."

"Oh, yes. Superintendent, it was your idea, the collective storage or whatever, wasn't it?" Masukawa snickered, yet his eyes were not smiling as he searched for Kaise's reaction.

Kaise clenched his fists in anger. "I won't take up much of your time. Let me ask you—"

Masukawa rolled his neck in a circle, looking fatigued.

"Too bad. The investigators have forbidden it. I'm not supposed to say anything to anyone."

"Hasn't your questioning ended?"

"They're going to continue tomorrow. So, I'll be leaving now. Excuse me."

Pushing the back door open, Masukawa headed for the parking area in the cold wind.

Crap! Kaise kicked the floor with the heel of his shoe.

Masukawa turned toward Kaise and, without bowing his head, got into his car. A navy-blue four-door sedan. Suddenly Kaise was overtaken with misgiving.

Had the investigating officer checked the car?

Masukawa had been in the station all night as officer in charge. And, it was this morning at 7:45 that Ōwada had opened the storage safe. That meant that the station was still in night-duty mode when the theft of the IDs was disclosed. The night-duty staff had not been allowed to go home and had been confined in the exercise room. If Masukawa was the culprit, he would have had no chance to take the stolen documents out of the station.

His body advanced of its own accord. He jumped in front of Masukawa's moving car. The brakes squealed.

"That's damn dangerous!"

"Sorry—could you let me look inside the trunk?"

Anger drained from Masukawa's face. "Why is that?"

"To confirm, just to make sure."

"Is that an order?"

Just open it up! Kaise's eyes burned with what he felt in his gut.

Masukawa nodded slightly and flipped the switch. The trunk slowly opened up. Kaise scurried to the back of the car. He peered

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inside. Some tools. Chains. Rags. A brush. . . .

"The investigating officer checked it first thing this morning."

Kaise raised his face as if he had been hit. Masukawa was looking at him out the driver's-side window. A triumphant smile played on his boastful face.

—Bastard!

"They also searched my belongings. They're treating me like a suspect."

". . ."

"Are you finished?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" Masukawa echoed softly.

Glaring at him, Kaise pulled in his chin slightly. "Sorry for stopping you."

Suddenly the engine roared. Its sound could have been Masukawa's shouts or his laughter.

6.

When he returned to the living room from looking in on Kōichi's and Yumiko's sleeping faces, Aiko was pouring tea.

"Were they asleep?"

"Yeah, fast asleep."

Aiko handed him a teacup and continued what she had been telling him.

"What do you think he did—the kid who spilled the paint on the floor?"

"What did he do?" So asking, Kaise sat down and tucked his legs into the covers under the table, warming them in the brazier.

"He overturned the bucket of water kept in the classroom in case of fire, so the paint would wash off. The floor was all wet, and Kō-chan's socks got soaked."

"That's extreme."

"He's only in fourth grade. It's a bit scary. There's all this talk about disruptions in classrooms these days."

On days when he came home late, he heard about the children's school from Aiko. This was a daily routine that Kaise had asked for, but tonight he was so tired it was hard to give attentive responses.

"Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you. We received a box of apples from Mr. Fuwatari."

Kaise turned his eyes to the wall clock. It was after ten o'clock.

"I'll call to thank him tomorrow," he said.

"Please do. He sends them each year. . . ." So saying, Aiko turned her head toward the kitchen. Her eyes widened.

What? Again?

She had heard it. The sound of the gas valve opening. Aiko was the only one who could hear it.

"It's all right," Kaise said softly.

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Aiko turned her pale face back and put both of her hands on her chest to calm her breathing.

During the five years that his father had lived with them, it was Aiko who had battled: Gas valve. Medicines. Knives. Rope. . . . Anything that could be used to commit suicide was under her supervision. Twenty-four hours a day. Three hundred sixty-five days a year. That was why his father was still alive. In exchange for Aiko's cheerfulness and the sheen of her hair.

"Dear . . ."

"Hm?"

"You went today, didn't you? To the hospital?"

". . ."

"How was your father?"

"He seemed the same as usual."

"I see. . . . Next time I'll go too."

Kaise did not give her a response.

His father and Aiko had shared the illness. Their hearts still resonated with each other. If she saw him, she would be held captive. Aiko's mind would not be able to slip out from the iron-barred hospital.

He now regretted that he had not talked it over with Aiko before committing his father to the hospital. Kaise had made the decision on his own, which had caused some ill feeling between the two of them. They were no longer a close couple. Those chilled feelings weighed heavily on Kaise's heart whenever they spoke of his father.

After Aiko had gone to the bedroom, Kaise snuggled under the cover up to his chest and lay back, resting his head on his arms crossed under his head. He was exhausted.

He had gone to the hospital that morning, been informed of the theft of the IDs, and had taken the full brunt of the attacks at the department heads' meeting. Going to U Station, he had endured Owada's shouting and had been treated high-handedly by Masukawa.

Is Masukawa guilty . . . ?

He didn't get it. It was certain that Masukawa didn't think well of the Police Affairs Department. From his way of talking, it could be deduced that he harbored quite some animosity. Kaise also felt that Masukawa had a terribly twisted character. But, if pressed as to whether Masukawa was suspicious, he would be in a dilemma as to the answer. He wouldn't put it past him to have done it, but if he had done it, he wouldn't have been that calm. And the IDs were not in Masukawa's car or belongings. The starting point for his suspicion of Masukawa was that he was the night-duty officer in charge, but Masukawa, who was unable to move away from his seat during his duty, was the most inconvenient person to take out the documents.

The most inconvenient, was it . . . ?

Kaise sighed.

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Most convenient. Most inconvenient. From the start, Kaise's thinking had been along those lines. In the end, Masukawa was nothing more than a convenient suspect for Kaise.

If the culprit was from outside the agency, the collective storage system would go down in defeat along with its original promoter, Kaise. If, however, the culprit was on the inside and the crime had been committed by someone related to the Criminal Investigations Department because of resentment toward the Police Affairs Department, the situation was entirely different. What should be blamed would be neither the storage system nor Kaise. It would be the culprit. Criminal Investigations Department Head Yamanouchi could never again beat up on Kaise. Thus the theory that Masukawa was the culprit was a scenario born of Kaise's wishes. He had designated Masukawa from among the countless suspects, including those outside the agency.

It was just a pipe dream, he began to see.

Even if Masukawa had done it, he seemed to be an opponent Kaise was unable to touch. He was a skilled detective who had dealt with all manner of criminals for more than twenty years. Kaise didn't have any experience in investigations, and he was in management without any authority to investigate this matter. The outcome of this struggle was clear before it had even begun.

Let Internal Investigations deal with it.

Exhaling roughly, Kaise sat up. He reached for his briefcase.

He spread some writing paper on the table. He had to prepare a draft of the press announcement. This was the one duty assigned to Kaise in this case.

Thirty minutes. . . . One hour. . . .

His pen wouldn't move.

Why the hell did he have to write this? Was this why he had become a police officer?

He was despondent.

He felt great respect for his father, who had been a lifelong policeman. Kaise had followed in his footsteps. He had never put much thought into promotions or advancements. All he had wanted was to be active on the front lines, whether it was as a beat cop, a detective, or a traffic cop. This was what he had repeatedly written in the journal assigned at the police school.

His environment had raised Kaise. The agency was overjoyed at the birth of a second-generation police officer. It had high expectations, just as parents do of their children. He was encouraged by many superiors who knew his father. *Aim to be like your father. Go beyond your father.*

He made efforts to fulfill those expectations. He worked hard at his duties and at passing the grade-promotion tests. But it was tough on him. He felt pressured. He felt that he was not being true to himself, that he was always reaching beyond his abilities as

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more demands were made on him.

Each time he was promoted, a voice inside whispered to him, *This is enough, don't go beyond this, this is about where it suits you best.* He also felt that the number of stars designating his rank trampled on his father's legacy. When his father became ill, he began to see the agency from a more distant perspective. Still, the higher-ups backed Kaise. Education Section. General Affairs Section. Police Affairs Section. . . . He was assigned to numerous responsible posts as a young candidate for management positions.

And this is the pitiful result.

The organization that had raised Kaise and had pulled him up to superintendent had turned on him due to just one incident. It had forced Kaise to take all the responsibility, had convicted him, and had isolated him.

He flung the pen down. As if in response, he heard a cough from the children's bedroom.

Kaise quietly opened the sliding door. Kōichi was curled up on his mattress. His covers had fallen onto the floor. It was the same for Yumiko. They were sleeping in the same posture. He replaced their covers and gazed at their sleeping faces. For a while he stayed that way.

He felt a warm glow in his heart.

The family ate dinner together. If that was impossible for him, he made every effort to return home before the children went to bed. He had tried to fulfill this promise to himself. He did what his own father had been unable to do in order to be a father himself.

But that would only be until next spring.

He would be ousted from headquarters. He would be sent off to a district office. He wouldn't be able to return soon. It might be three years. It might be five years. Or he might have to go from one district post to another for a much longer time. It would be cruel to pull his children away from their friends. He would go alone, leaving his family here.

Kaise went back to the living room.

He put away the writing paper and took out the file from his briefcase. It was a copy of U Station's night-duty report. He had been able to get ahold of this. What had been the scene in the station last night? He didn't know how much significance there was in finding that out, but he had to try.

I'll flail around as much as I can.

He looked through the copy.

6:23 P.M.: Injury traffic accident. Three officers sent out. Returned at 8:40. 7:10: Report of a fight. Two officers sent out, determined it was a false report. Returned at 7:58. 8:20: Traffic accident involving an object. Two officers. Returned at 10:05.

He checked the names of the night-duty officers and the times they were out of the station according to each incident and acci-

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dent. It was more complicated than he had expected. It was more than he could keep straight in his mind.

Kaise used scissors to cut the writing paper to make thirteen rectangles. He filled in the name of each night-duty officer on each piece of paper. He set the right side of the table as "inside U Station," the left side as "outside station" and "sleeping quarters," and reenacted the events in the night-duty report.

He spent two hours working on the puzzle-like task. He was still in the midst of it when his hand stopped.

For twenty-three minutes, from midnight on, there were only two slips of paper, "Masukawa" and "Totsuka," in U Station.

Totsuka Kōichirō. First Criminal Investigations Section, Burglary Section Police Officer. Age 25. He was directly subordinate to Masukawa.

An accomplice . . .

If that were the case, it would explain why the IDs were not with Masukawa. He had ordered Totsuka to take them out of the station.

Three A.M. Calming down his excitement, Kaise went to the bedroom. He crept in quietly, but, as always, Aiko opened her eyes.

7.

"I'll be a little late." Kaise put in his call to his section first thing in the morning. Flustered, Subsection Chief Ioka transferred the call to the section chief. Section Chief Kosuga didn't ask the reason for Kaise's tardiness. He told him perfunctorily to hurry up and hand in the draft for the press conference. It would be held the next day at one P.M.

I still have a day.

Nine A.M. Kaise visited the singles dormitory for U Station. Announcing himself to the dormitory caretaker, he went up to the second floor.

Room 203. Just as he expected, Totsuka Kōichirō was dead asleep in his bed. The time allowed for sleep by night-duty officers was only four hours. His day off, yesterday, was taken up with questioning by Internal Investigation, so he was sleeping as long as he could today.

"Officer Totsuka, please get up." Kaise shook his body. Mumbling a few senseless words, Totsuka opened his eyes halfway, then suddenly sprang up.

"Good morning, sir!"

He had been posted to U Station after police-box work and had spent one year as guard of the holding cell. It was from this spring that he had joined the burglary group. He was in the midst of a three-year training period to become a detective. His round face and buzz cut reminded one of a potato. But looking close, Kaise saw narrow eyes that looked unyielding and a mouth clamped shut in a straight line.

"I'm being questioned by Internal Investigations in the after-

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noon. I cannot reply to your questions." Sitting formally on the floor with his legs tucked under him, Totsuka refused point-blank.

"You don't have to be so hard-headed. All I want to know is what the station was like night before last."

He got no replies no matter what he asked. Totsuka kept repeating that he couldn't answer. Although it was impossible to make a seasoned detective like Masukawa talk, Kaise had hoped that he might make a greenhorn give something up. It seemed, however, that the blood of the Criminal Investigation Department flowed all the way to the nerves of the lowest-ranking officers.

Show me your real feelings, Kaise thought in frustration.

"Then let me hear your opinion. This isn't an interrogation."

". . ."

"Do you think this crime was committed by an outsider?"

"No, sir, I don't," Totsuka's firm voice answered immediately.

"Why is that?"

"We were on night duty. We didn't let anyone in, not even a cat."

"So that means it was an inside job?"

"That, I wouldn't know."

"If it wasn't an outside job, then it would have to be an inside job, wouldn't it?"

"I wouldn't know."

Kaise's leading questions also reached a dead end.

He put his final question to Totsuka. "What do you think of the collective storage of IDs?"

"Well . . ." There was a pause. "I wouldn't know about that."

Kaise stood up. "Sorry to bother you. Go back to sleep."

"Sir . . ." Totsuka started. His face was flushed red.

"What is it?"

"I think the collective storage of the IDs leads to a significant decline in police-officer morale."

Kaise gazed at Totsuka as if looking at something that was too bright, then he looked around the room. The thirty IDs might have been here for a while. Just outside the window was the U Station building with the national flag fluttering in the wind.

Kaise went to the Headquarters Police Affairs Department. Totsuka hadn't leaked any information. But this was a course he had embarked on, so he would confront Masukawa again this evening. As he was so thinking, he received a telephone call from Masukawa himself, saying he wanted to talk to him.

What had made him do that?

With a sense of caution, Kaise climbed the stairs of U Station.

The third floor. First Criminal Investigation Section. His hand on the door, he hesitated a moment. He had never entered this section, even when he was posted at U Station.

So what?

Opening the door, he was surrounded by a particular scent and

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heaviness to the air inside the room. The overlapping faces of the detectives. Their eyes. Their way of breathing.

"Thank you for coming over." A voice sounded from a seat deep inside the room, and Masukawa came forward. His loping movement was the same as the night before, but his face looked entirely different. The dullness of the night before was replaced by a sharp light from eyes that dominated his entire face.

Masukawa opened the door to the interrogation room. "Let's do it in here."

Masukawa sat his large frame down on the flimsy chair readied for the suspect on the other side of the steel desk. He crossed his legs with an exaggerated motion.

"Why don't you start off first? The Internal Investigations questioning has finished. So I can reply to any of your questions."

What is he up to? Kaise was troubled by the phrase "start off first." But Masukawa had also said he would answer any question he had. He would be foolish to let this opportunity pass. Sitting down in the chair, Kaise promptly began.

"During the night duty, there were no intruders from the outside. That means it's an inside job, doesn't it?"

"Probably," Masukawa stated readily.

"Who do you think it was?"

"Army Sergeant would be the most likely. Because he was the one who opened and closed the storage safe."

That was most logical. However . . .

"Does Police Sergeant Ōwada have a motive to steal the notebooks?"

"Right. That is where we hit a dead end."

"If not him, then who is suspicious?"

Masukawa rolled his neck around in a circle. "I guess it would be me. Since the storage-safe key was hanging right in front of my eyes."

There was a breath-long pause. Kaise looked into his eyes.

"Do you have a motive?"

"I certainly do. I've wanted to quash this crappy system of collective storage."

"What do you mean by crappy system . . . ?"

It was Masukawa who first showed his anger.

"Isn't that enough? Now, you listen to what I have to say. Aren't you playing dirty, barging in on Totsuka when he was asleep?"

Was that the issue? Now that he realized what Masukawa really felt, Kaise's tension relaxed.

"I don't think it was dirty. I just want to get the stolen documents back."

"You mean, Totsuka and I did it. That's what you want to say?"

"You have motive. You said so yourself, didn't you?"

"Hey, keep it within limits, why don't you? If detectives who catch thieves become thieves, it's the end."

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"You were alone with Totsuka from midnight, weren't you?"

"Don't bother. Forget about lording it over and playing at interrogating when you're an inexperienced Police Affairs guy."

"What are you calling me . . . ?"

"I don't have any interest in a castrated management type. Go back to Headquarters and kiss the ass of the career executives."

Anger shot through the core of Kaise's body. He charged at Masukawa and grabbed his shirt. "Say that again!"

"You want to fight?"

Masukawa grabbed Kaise's shirt with twice the strength. He throttled him with his powerful grip. The two of them shot out to the side of the desk, still grabbing on to each other.

"Take it back!"

"You take it back! Totsuka is turning in the cold air about now!"

"This is work for me, too!"

"Well then . . ."

Charged by Masukawa's massive body, Kaise was smashed against the wall. He couldn't move.

"Don't make it sound like you know what you were asking! What kind of work do you guys do, anyway? We're putting our lives on the line here. We're protecting the town. What the hell are you guys protecting? The Headquarters Department Head? Yourself? Just give me an answer!"

"Idiot! It's my family that I'm protecting, of course!"

Masukawa's grip slackened a bit. Kaise took advantage of this opening and desperately moved his hips aside. Their balance crumbled. They fell against the steel desk.

Hearing the ruckus, several detectives burst into the room.

"Let go!" Kaise yelled, but his arms and hips were pinned down, as he and Masukawa glared at each other. They were both breathing heavily.

"It's nothing. We were just playing." Masukawa shook off the hands of the detectives and turned his face toward Kaise. He had lost his will to fight.

"Are we finished, Superintendent?"

". . ."

Leaving the interrogation room, Masukawa stopped in his tracks, and after a while turned back. "It's the same for me, too. When all is said and done, I'm protecting my family."

This guy is innocent. Kaise realized this when he heard the quiet seriousness in Masukawa's voice.

8.

Headquarters, Police Affairs Section. Eight P.M.

The only light was at Kaise's desk. His writing paper was still blank. Kaise didn't even attempt to take out his pen.

His brain repeatedly checked the facts of the case.

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Masukawa is innocent.

His conviction was unwavering. Masukawa had been facing the key on the wall all night. That meant that the other night-duty officers were also innocent. It appeared that way.

Masukawa would have left his seat to go to the toilet. There might be a culprit who had a copy of the key. There might be an outside person who could succeed in committing the crime in a million-in-one chance of timing. But Kaise did not turn his eyes toward such farfetched possibilities. It was because he had forcibly set Masukawa up as a "convenient culprit" that he had lost sight of the true nature of the case and had strayed off course. He was through with choosing a side path and getting lost in a forest with no exit.

He would follow the main branch. If he got rid of the possibilities of the night-duty staff and an outside culprit, what was left was the Police Affairs Section. That was where the perpetrator was.

That evening, he had got hold of Yamazaki Tomoyo and talked with her at a coffee shop. Did anyone in the section have a grudge against Ōwada? Tomoyo laughed off the question. "He is disliked, for sure, but it's overstating it to say he's hated." He cast out the name of Officer Kamiya, but she said he was on daytime duty the day of the incident and was not at the station that night. "Besides, young Kamiya isn't the kind of kid who goes around hating people. He's never even complained about Police Sergeant Ōwada." Perhaps fed up with Kaise, who continued to persist, Tomoyo said in the end, "You won't get anywhere suspecting people in the Police Affairs Section. After all, it's Mr. Ōwada who has the key to the storage safe."

Ultimately, that was what he came back to.

Ōwada Tōru.

He was in charge of the first-floor storage safe. He alone took care of the key to the storage safe, and on the day of the incident, he had collected the IDs. Circumstantially, he satisfied all the conditions for being a suspect.

Tomoyo's face concurred. Masukawa had also clearly stated this. The conclusion that a seasoned detective had reasonably come to was Ōwada.

Yet, no one could fathom his motive.

Kaise leaned back in his chair.

Motive . . .

Nothing came to mind. Ōwada stole the notebooks. That "Army Sergeant" whose beliefs were based on strict obedience to rules and regulations.

If he had a motive, it could only be the "season of the devil" so immediately prior to his retirement; that a storm unable to be detected from his outward appearance was raging in Ōwada's heart.

Or might there be an unavoidable circumstance? Some circumstance making him steal the IDs. . . . Kaise couldn't think there was one. A circumstance that would make him throw away the convictions

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he had held for forty years and steal his fellow officers' documents.

Circumstance . . .

What? Kaise was beset by a strange thought.

I know that circumstance. I've heard it somewhere. He had that sense.

Not a circumstance, but a setup. That might be it. He felt he knew something.

He searched inside himself. As if he were following the afterimage of a shooting star. In his heart. Where his memory was lodged. Desperately.

It disappeared. It disappeared and scattered away. Where did it go? What was that strange sensation?

"Excuse me." The section room's door opened, and the beam of a flashlight swept across the wall. It was the Headquarters night-duty officer making his rounds.

"Superintendent, is everything all right?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Your face is pale white."

9.

"Yumiko said she was praised by her teacher today."

"Oh, for what?"

"For being able to write her name in characters even though she's only in second grade. She had practiced a lot."

"Yes, she had."

Kaise looked at Aiko's profile as she peeled a tangerine. She's gotten older, he thought.

"Aiko . . ."

"Yes, what is it?"

"How about building a house soon?"

In general, transfers meant the entire family moved. But if one had a house, one's superiors gave tacit approval for a posting unaccompanied by family. Aiko looked intently at Kaise.

"A house . . . ? But you're not expecting to be transferred for a while. So it doesn't make sense to build now."

"But I may be, in the spring."

"Really?"

"Yeah. So let's at least be prepared."

He stood up and went to the toilet as if to escape.

The time limit is near.

A sense of resigning himself to the inevitable spread over him. Two days was just too short a time. Tonight, after Aiko went to bed, he had to write up what would be quoted in the newspapers and on television. With this he would be ousted from his position in his section.

Is this also one of my punishments?

Owada's face kept flitting across his mind. He might be the culprit. Even so, there was nothing Kaise could do now. He had no

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proof. He couldn't figure out a motive. Kaise didn't have a strong enough sense of intuition to insist that he was the perpetrator.

It's over. It's all . . .

When he left the washroom, he heard a dry cough. It was worse than the night before.

Kōichi's really caught a cold now.

He went into the children's room and placed the covers over them. Noiselessly he turned his body around. It was then.

Ah.

Kaise stood stock-still.

It came.

The sensation he'd had. Again.

It was last night. Yes, he had heard it last night. He had definitely heard something. Something important. . . .

Kaise rushed back to the living room.

"Aiko, what was it?"

"What?"

"You were saying something yesterday . . ."

"Well, Mr. Fuwatari sent some apples . . ."

"No. That's not it."

"Oh, about Kō-chan's class? There was a kid who spilled some paint . . ."

That was it.

In order to cover up the fact that he had spilled paint, he had doused it with a bucket of water.

That was the setup.

In order to hide the fact that one ID had disappeared, twenty-nine others were stolen.

Say Ōwada lost his ID. Though it was not obvious from his outward appearance, there was some disturbance in Ōwada's mind as he faced imminent retirement. He was absent-minded. He was careless. He lost his ID, the very soul of a police officer. Take that as an assumption.

He couldn't report that he had lost his ID. Even if his lips were pried open, Ōwada couldn't admit this. This man who had lived strictly according to rules and regulations would be fully disgraced. His forty years of life as a police officer would burst like a bubble. That was his motive. That was the sole thing that could be the motive that pushed Ōwada to commit this crime. His retirement date was soon. Ōwada valued his "Army Sergeant" moniker. Wasn't that what was at the root of this incident?

Kaise looked at the clock. Ten-fifteen.

He saw the motive. But he had no proof.

What should I do?

If Ōwada was the culprit, the IDs were no doubt safe. Kaise couldn't fathom him throwing them away. He would return them after he retired. He must be thinking along those lines.

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They were hidden somewhere. His house. His garden. A park. A coin locker. . . .

Should Kaise contact Internal Investigations? Or should he collaborate with the Criminal Investigation Department to deal with this?

That would be useless. His idea would be laughed off. Even if the higher-ups moved on this, what if the culprit wasn't Ōwada? It would be accusing a police officer who had lived strictly by the book of being a burglar. Kaise's word would smear mud on the last moment of Ōwada's life as a police officer.

I'll have to make him admit it myself. Kaise made up his mind.

But his opponent was "Army Sergeant." If he approached him directly, he would probably be rebuffed. If Ōwada was guilty, he must have committed the crime under duress. He would hardly admit at this point that he was the one.

No . . .

It wasn't necessary to make him admit it. What was at stake was the IDs. It was all right as long as twenty-nine IDs were returned. Then, what could be done . . .

Kaise fell into deep thought. He didn't hear Aiko speaking.

Eleven o'clock. Kaise stood up. "I'm going out for a bit."

10.

The two-story house was small for a single-family dwelling.

With no hesitation he rang the doorbell. Three times . . . four times . . . five times . . .

"Who's there at this hour?"

He heard the voice first as Ōwada burst out the door.

"Superintendent? . . . What is it that you want of me? And at this hour!"

Kaise apologized for his rudeness and said, "I found out who stole the IDs."

Ōwada's large eyes opened wider. He tried to say something in response, but his lips only trembled a bit and no words came forth.

Kaise's conviction was confirmed. *It is this man after all.*

He was led into the living room.

There was a framed photograph of Ōwada's three sons. One worked for an apparel manufacturer. Another was a hair stylist. The third was a video-game software designer. Kaise had heard this from Tomoyo. It appeared that the occupations chosen by the sons were witness to a long history of family discord. A negative role model. No doubt Ōwada had been the "Army Sergeant" at home as well.

"Thank you for waiting." Ōwada appeared, neatly dressed. He had regained his composure, but he couldn't hide his stiff expression.

They sat formally facing each other.

"Inspector, who is the perpetrator?" Ōwada started off, in the tense atmosphere.

Kaise spoke slowly, "I don't have a name."

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"What do you mean? You just said you knew . . ."

"I had a telephone call from the culprit. Anonymously."

"Yes?" The muscles of Ōwada's face slackened. "But why did you come here?"

"Because it is related to you."

"To me?"

"Yes." As he gauged Ōwada's response, Kaise continued to read the script he had in his mind. "The culprit didn't give his name. But he did state his motive. He was full of hatred toward you. If he stole the IDs, it would cause hardship for you as the one in charge of the storage. He said that is why he did it."

Ōwada sank into silence. He probed Kaise's eyes.

Kaise gave force to his words. "But he has become afraid. He wants to return the documents. That is what he said. However . . ." his voice became even firmer, "he tore up your ID. So he can only return twenty-nine of them."

". . ."

Listen to me carefully, Kaise thought, as he continued in a prayerful way. "I told the culprit to make certain he returns them by noon tomorrow to a place where a police officer can find them."

Ōwada nodded. Or Kaise had this illusion.

"That is all. I ask that you keep this matter a secret. I don't intend to report this to my superiors."

"You're not reporting it?"

"No. If it causes a commotion and the culprit is scared off from returning the IDs, all this will be futile. As long as the IDs are returned, the rest doesn't matter. That is the way I feel."

Their gazes locked onto each other.

It's all set, Kaise thought. He believed it.

As Ōwada saw Kaise out, he took a breath and said with deep emotion, "Your father was a fine man, but you've become a fine police officer just like him."

Kaise couldn't fathom Ōwada's intent.

He looked once more into Ōwada's eyes.

Tomorrow. You must.

11.

The Headquarters Police Affairs Section was bustling from early morning.

On orders from the Headquarters Department Chief, Police Affairs Department Head Kamoike would be in charge of the press briefing at 1 P.M. Section Chief Kosuga was off the hook, but learning that Kaise had not drafted the briefing text, he flew into a rage. But that was only his way of posturing to those in the section. No doubt thinking that there might be a problem, as usual he had given a second order for the text. The announcement that Subsection Chief Ioka had prepared on the word processor had already been printed out and

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had received the approval of the Headquarters Department Head.

Kaise sat at his desk without moving. He was fretfully waiting for news of the discovery of the IDs.

I beg of you. All he could do was to pray for the result.

Time passed quickly. All of a sudden it was past 10:30, and when he next looked up it was close to 11:00.

The promise was for morning. Wasn't that it?

The telephone rang. "Yes, Kaise here."

"Hello, dear." It was Aiko.

"What is it?" His voice was mixed with irritation.

"There was a call from the hospital. . . . Your father's condition is worse."

Father's condition . . . !

"How bad is it?"

"I don't know. They said he suddenly collapsed in the hallway." Aiko was upset.

". . ."

Kaise was distressed. Should he go? But . . .

"I'll leave right now," said Aiko.

". . ."

"I'll be fine. I'll take a taxi."

"Sorry."

He placed the receiver down as he contained his feelings.

After this the telephone remained silent.

The clock advanced. Both the second hand and the minute hand. They were moving too fast.

Did Ōwada intend not to return the IDs? Or did Kaise miss hitting the target?

No, it's Ōwada. There's no mistake.

The noon signal rang out. "By morning" was over.

Crap!

Someone turned on the television. The noon news was being broadcast. The next news was at three o'clock. The top story was certain to be the large-scale theft of IDs from J Prefectural Police.

Surely, it can't be. . . . A new worry rose up.

Ōwada may have done his part and placed the IDs somewhere on the station grounds. But they hadn't been found. They might be in a hard place to locate. Perhaps that was it.

"Subsection Chief Ioka, come over here please."

To Ioka, who approached with a stiff expression, Kaise whispered, "The IDs are on the grounds of U Station."

"What?"

"I want to ask you to search for them. In the hedges. The parking lot. The garage. Make a full search."

Out of the corner of his eyes Ioka glanced toward Section Chief Kosuga. Kosuga was looking in Kaise's direction. Kaise pulled Ioka toward him.

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"No matter what happens, I'll be leaving in the spring. It's my last request. Please do as I ask."

"But, but, Superintendent . . ." Ioka's face was distorted. He was not a bad human being. He was just timid.

"Will you do it for me?"

"I understand. I'll go." Ioka flew out of the section room.

Twelve-fifteen. . . . Thirty. . . . Forty-five.

Nothing from Ioka yet . . . !

Department Head Kamoike walked into the section room. The press announcement was to be in fifteen minutes.

It won't be in time! Kaise grabbed the telephone receiver roughly. He called U Station's internal line. Ōwada's desk . . .

Yamazaki Tomoyo's bright voice came on the line. She said Ōwada had gone to lunch.

"Crap!"

Kamoike glared at Kaise as he slammed the receiver down.

"I'm off to wipe up after your mess."

It's no good.

Kamoike turned his back on Kaise. It was then that the telephone rang. He snatched the phone. It was Ioka's voice.

"I found them! Behind the garage!"

Kaise stood up and shouted toward the section-room door. "Wait on the announcement! The IDs have been found!"

The section room broke out in an uproar. Kamoike and Kosuga stood, shocked looks on their faces.

Kaise yelled into the receiver, "Ioka, how many IDs are there?"

"I'm counting them. Let's see, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight . . . There are twenty-eight!"

Twenty-eight?

"Count them again."

"There's no mistake. Twenty-eight. There are two missing."

"Whose are missing?"

"Um, Police Affairs Section Police Sergeant Ōwada's . . . and Police Affairs Section Police Officer Kamiya's IDs."

Kamiya's ID . . . ? Kaise's strength drained from him. He dropped into his seat and leaned back. *Why . . . ?*

The section room was in turmoil. The press conference on the theft of the IDs was hastily replaced with an announcement of new police jackets. The young section staffer and female officer who were just now chosen to be models pulled on the prototype jackets and rushed out the door.

It was after the commotion was over that Kaise at last arrived at a conclusion. He wondered if it was what had actually transpired. He still couldn't believe it.

So that was it.

It had been officer Kamiya who had lost his ID. Receiving this report, Ōwada had committed the theft to hide this fact. He had

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covered up for the younger man. The penalty for losing one's police ID was heavy. It would affect Kamiya in the future. It might even block his promotions. . . .

He had covered for his subordinate.

That wasn't all, though. Ōwada wouldn't stain his hands with a crime for such a simplistic motive. Most likely, Ōwada's inner feelings complicated the situation.

Ōwada had said, "Your father was a fine man, but you've become a fine police officer just like him."

His own three sons had chosen other paths in life. Ōwada must have wanted them to follow in his footsteps. Hadn't he wished for sons who would take their father's way of life as their model and follow him?

He had placed his unfulfilled dream on Kamiya, who had just begun his way in the police force. On that fresh, young police officer.

"Season of the devil" . . . that was the only explanation.

Kaise still had a hard time believing it.

But the fact that it was twenty-eight IDs that were returned told Kaise it was Ōwada's crime after all. If it was only Kamiya's ID that wasn't returned, he would be the one under scrutiny. That was why Ōwada got rid of his own ID as well. With the discovery of hatred toward the "Army Sergeant," Internal Investigations wouldn't be able to see through to the core of the case.

It would remain an unsolved case. Along with Ōwada's retirement. . . .

Telling Kosuga that he was going to the hospital, Kaise left the Headquarters building.

He drove toward the highway. Just as he was about to leave the city, he felt his mobile phone vibrating in his chest pocket. Kaise slid his car into the gasoline stand at the corner.

"Dear, he seems fine. He had a bit of anemia." The tone of Aiko's voice was like a song. He had forgotten what her true voice was like.

"Really?"

"He's sleeping in his bed now. He was awake when I came. When he saw me, he said, 'Yah.'"

"Oh, that, it means he's happy."

"You knew that?"

"You knew that, too?"

"Of course, from a long time ago."

"Really . . ."

"I'll come from now on. I've become friendly with the nurse."

He thought of Yagi Akane's bright, smiling face.

Putting his mobile phone back into his chest pocket, Kaise turned his car onto the highway and stepped on the accelerator.

"Yah," he said softly to himself.

It was then that a view of the sea—with a calmness that belied the winter season—opened up in front of him. ●

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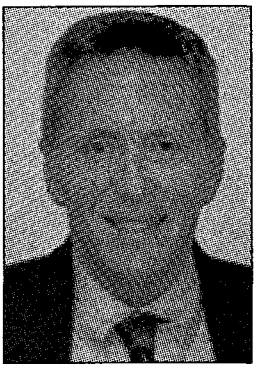
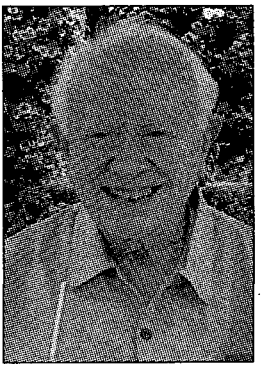
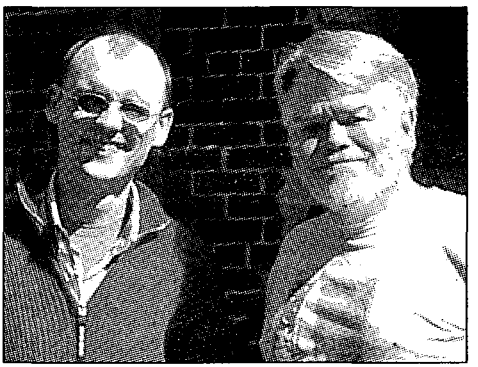
2007 READERS AWARD



David Dean



Edward D. Hoch



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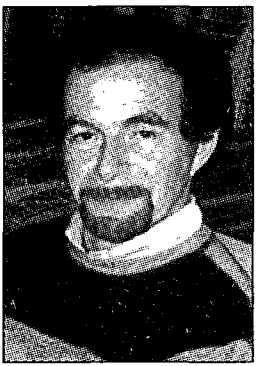

Dale C. Andrews

Doug Allyn

He's a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, a recipient of the Private Eye Writers of America's Lifetime Achievement Award, a winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award and two Anthony Awards, and now, for the first time, by a tie vote, Edward D. Hoch, a contributor to every issue of *EQMM* since 1973, is an *EQMM* Readers Award winner! The Rochester, New York, author has ten long-running series in *EQMM*, and the split of his votes among the many stories he has eligible has always previously prevented him from claiming the Readers Award's top spot. It took an entry in his most popular series, starring the inimitable thief Nick Velvet, "The Theft of the Ostracized Ostrich" (Sept./Oct.), to put him over the top. The Velvet stories were made into a series for French TV in the 1970s. Your votes this year show that Velvet continues to beguile, as does his creator, who has provided more hours of entertainment for our readers than anyone else in the magazine's long history!

Also in first place this year, in a tie with Edward D. Hoch, is David Dean, who broke into our Department of First Stories in 1989. That debut story was the first he had ever submitted to any publication and

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he followed up on his quick success with other memorable contributions to *EQMM*. A number of his tales have been anthologized, and his *EQMM* story "Trial by Fire" was nominated for the PWA's Shamus Award in 1995. His work has appeared in the top ten in the Readers Award voting on several occasions, but this is the first time he has made it to the top tier. His first-place story, "Ibrahim's Eyes" (June), draws on his military experience. Raised in Georgia, he served as a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division. After leaving the military in 1987, he joined the police in New Jersey. He is now Chief of Police for Avalon, New Jersey, but finds time to send us one or two splendid new tales each year.

Second place this year (with only a point separating it from first!) goes to the co-authored Department of First Stories Ellery Queen pastiche "The Book Case" (May 2007) by Dale C. Andrews (who is Deputy Assistant General Counsel for Litigation at the U.S. Department of Transportation) and Kurt Sercu (head nurse in an intensive care unit in Sijsele, Belgium). Both writers are lifelong Ellery Queen fans, so avid that Kurt Sercu created and is webmaster of "Ellery Queen: A Website of Deduction." Through his site he began a correspondence with Dale Andrews. They met in person for the first time when both attended the 2005 Ellery Queen Centenary Symposium. The idea for "The Book Case" had been germinating in Dale Andrews's mind for some time, and he and his co-author outlined the basic plot on a train ride following the event. Drafts were then exchanged by e-mail until the story was complete—to the delight of our readers!

Seven-time Readers Award winner Doug Allyn has claimed third place this year with the non-series tale "Stone Cold Christmas" (January). One of the most celebrated of short story writers, with an Edgar Allan Poe Award and an additional six Edgar Award nominations to his credit, the Michiganer has been a favorite of *EQMM* readers ever since he first began appearing in this magazine in 1988. This year only one point separated the Readers Award record-holder from a second place finish, and only two points stood between him and an eighth Readers Award. A photo finish, you might say. Hats off to them all!

Fourth	"Snowbird" by Michael Bracken and Tom Sweeney
Fifth *(tied)*	"Dead as a Dog" by Doug Allyn
	"Blues in the Kabul Night" by Clark Howard
Sixth *(tied)*	"Popping Round to the Post" by Peter Lovesey
	"Death at Delphi" by Marilyn Todd
Seventh *(tied)*	"Jangle" by Brynn Bonner
	"Room for Improvement" by Marilyn Todd
Eighth *(tied)*	"Dear Dr. Watson" by Steve Hockensmith
	"The World Behind" by Chris F. Holm
Ninth	"The Winning Ticket" by Bill Pronzini
Tenth *(tied)*	"Road Gamble" by Scott William Carter
	"The Royals of San Marco High" by Jodi Tamara Harrison

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SUCHNESS

by Rosemary M. Magee

Tatum jotted down her thoughts on a notepad, just like the one her mother used to have on hand for shopping lists. She also kept a daily journal in her composition book, because she knew the truth: All feeling is really a memory. If you write down the feelings, the memories turn out to be true.

When the school security guard came to her room asking for details and a description of the strange man she'd reported on campus, Tatum pulled out her notes and read aloud: *Tall and smart-looking. Shoulders rounded. His jacket, a windbreaker, dark green. In the library, at the computer near me, then in the coffee shop in town reading the* New York Times. *He looks alone, maybe even lonesome.*

"I've also seen him outside the dorm window," Tatum informed the security guard. "He looked right at me. After I closed the blinds, I peeked once more in between the slats, and he stood there as if searching for something he'd lost." Tatum and the security guard both turned toward the still-darkened window.

"There have been other times," Tatum added quietly.

The security guard, who shifted her gaze back to Tatum, wore large glasses that made her eyes big and blurry. She wasn't very old; it didn't seem quite right to Tatum to call her Officer Reynolds, which was written on the silver badge on her chest. Her first name was Cathy, but that didn't seem right either.

"You've seen him other times recently on campus?" Officer Cathy probed.

"Oh yes," Tatum replied. She was named after Tatum O'Neal, the child star her mother liked to watch over and over again in a movie

Rosemary Magee is Vice President and Secretary of Emory University, but she still finds time to write short stories and critical essays. Her literary stories have appeared in *Porcupine, Southern Humanities Review, Atlanta Magazine, Iron Horse Literary Review, Sanskrit,* and *Eclipse.* This is her first venture into the world of popular fiction and her first crime story. We think you'll agree that it's a promising debut.

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about a young girl and adventures with her father. "I see the man often when I'm alone. He's always by himself, too."

"Has he said anything to you, gotten in your path, or tried to touch you in any way?"

"Oh no. He just follows me around and stares."

Officer Cathy stared at her too, through those thick glasses. She was short, shorter than Tatum. Her shoulders were broad, like a boy's, and her shoes were black and heavy. Tatum wondered if she had to run fast sometimes, and if she knew how to use a gun, even though she didn't wear one. Tatum liked having her nearby.

"I may follow you around a bit on campus, so don't be alarmed," Officer Cathy informed her. "That's just SOP." When Tatum blinked blankly in response, Officer Cathy explained on her way out the door, "You know, 'standard operating procedure.' "

Tatum lay back on her bed, satisfied. She didn't write in the same journal for this part. She pulled another one out from underneath the special satin pillow her mother had made for her.

What does it feel like to have the Secret Service around you all of the time, like presidents, their wives, and their children? SOP.

Officer Cathy asked me more questions. I think he has green eyes, or maybe blue, not brown. But no glasses, except for reading. He usually has a spiral notebook and the newspaper all folded up.

Going to class now felt more interesting to Tatum. She thought she might see the man, because she had written and talked about him, or she might run into Officer Cathy on her rounds. With the early, powdery pollen of springtime floating in the air, she felt lighter somehow. The pudgy weight she wanted to lose to make her mother happy didn't hold her back so much. Tatum felt less shy, too. Back at home, she'd worn black jeans with dark tops and had frowned intentionally at anyone who came her way. Now it was easier to smile—because she knew someone was watching her.

On her daily walks, Tatum wore the long, striped, colorful scarf that belonged to her roommate. Jen, who was studying Eastern religions, had renounced materialism; she'd tossed the scarf in a pile of woolens after the last snowstorm. Tatum kept it wrapped around her neck. She liked recycled things. Her favorite store in town was the All Souls Thrift Shop. Expensive clothes that the other girls discarded cost just a few dollars there. She didn't care if her classmates recognized their designer clothing on her. It meant they had a bond. In the evenings, for dinner, she wore some of her mother's cast-off blouses, shiny ones bought for parties before she got too sick to go out anymore.

On Tuesday, Officer Cathy left a message that she had additional questions for Tatum. They met in her dorm room again. Tatum showed her what she had written in her journals, the main one. There was just one entry from the weekend.

Yesterday he sat on a bench by the pond. I think he knows my

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schedule, even weekends. His pants are khaki, and they look like someone ironed them. But his shoes are brown and scruffy.

Then on Monday, she had written:

He was not on the bench today, but I think I saw him in the hallway of the Hayes Building. He looks tired to me, as if he couldn't sleep.

"You saw him inside Hayes?" Officer Cathy probed.

"That's where my history course is," Tatum explained. "I was working on my class project. Mine is on the British Museum, and whether or not the collectors stole ancient artifacts from Greece and Italy." Tatum knew they did, which was not just a feeling; it was a fact.

"How close were you to him?" Officer Cathy asked in a tense voice.

Tatum's parents would not be pleased to learn that a tall man in a green jacket was following her around campus. They were counting on her staying safe while her mother had chemotherapy treatments. She was losing her hair, even her eyebrows.

"We brushed by each other in the corridor," Tatum replied. Officer Cathy made a note on her small spiral pad in a red pen. Just talking about him gave Tatum stomach flutters.

After curfew she told Jen about the man. Jen sat on the floor in a lotus position, wearing only bikini underwear and a tank top. Tatum lounged on the bed, her entire body covered by a long T-shirt, one that had been discarded by her father. Jen listened so quietly that Tatum thought she might have fallen asleep while meditating.

The next day a notice in Jen's cursive handwriting appeared on the hall bulletin board: "Watch out for stalkers! Report anything suspicious to school security." She decorated it with a border of peace symbols. Tatum liked the way it looked. When Sara from the school newspaper called her up and asked for a description, Tatum held her cell phone against her ear and closed her eyes. She lay back on the bed.

"Yes, he's about forty, I'd say. Not nearly as old as my father," she guessed. "His hair hangs down in his eyes like somebody even younger, though. Somebody who doesn't think to comb it every day."

Sara assured Tatum that she would not identify her source in the story, but news travels fast in a small place. On Wednesday, when the paper came out, several people asked Tatum to sit with them at lunch. She hoped that Officer Cathy would notice all of her new friends. Tatum planned to bring her a cappuccino from the coffee shop in town, the one where the man watched her from behind his newspaper.

That afternoon Tatum worked on the British Museum project in the library. From the school computer, she downloaded images, cut-

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ting and pasting them with Superglue on a poster board. The pictures were of ancient artifacts taken from the Mediterranean. *The British Museum is a thief,* she wrote in the heading. In smaller print, she added: *The English exploited other people in distant countries, even after they had given up colonization, stealing their history from them and claiming it as their own. Famous museums in America also knowingly took donations from rich people who bought stolen goods from Greece or Italy. They knew what they were doing. They couldn't help themselves. They let the facts of the situation get all tangled up with their desires.*

Tatum wanted to tell the tall man about these illicit acts. Maybe he was someone who used to teach here, or the husband of one of her teachers who wasn't even aware that he came on campus, because he was supposed to be working at the Corner Bookstore or in City Hall, defending criminals. That was it. He defended criminals, and he needed to conduct research in the library on campus in order to understand the criminal mind.

Jen had started talking to Tatum about all kinds of things. That night she described her paper topic for the Eastern religions course.

"Suchness," she stated matter-of-factly. "It's Buddhist." When Tatum took off her glasses, Jen looked small.

"Suchness," Jen repeated from her distant bed. "It means something like being present."

"Whatness?" Tatum asked. She'd been reading *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* for literature, and they'd learned about James Joyce and his kind of crazy epiphanies.

"No, it's *Suchness.* Which is what *you* need," Jen stated in a superior voice. "We all do," she added softly.

She read from her textbook: "For Buddhists, truth and acceptance are the pillars of faith. 'Suchness' is a term used to describe life as it is, the truth as it is. A flower is a flower. Without the knowledge of Suchness, we find ourselves trying to make life into something that it is not through false desires and illusions."

Jen stared into space, looking thoroughly pleased with this idea. She took a bite out of a peach her mother had sent in a basket from South Carolina with matzos. Being the Southern Jewish girl on campus who studied Buddhism gave her an air of importance.

"This peach is a peach—nothing more, nothing less," Jen added solemnly.

"Suchness," Tatum repeated. It sounded like a kiss. The word made her think about the tall man.

She wrote in her journal, while Jen took her shower.

Today he sat on the bench by the lake. I frowned at him rather than smiling. He moved slightly closer, then watched me when I got up and walked away.

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For her very private satin-pillow journal, she added, *I could tell he wanted to follow me. I want him to know about Suchness, about the feeling of being inside a kiss, of expecting to be kissed.*

Tatum stopped by the security office the next day after classes. She'd hoped that Officer Cathy would ask her more questions and read from the composition journal that Tatum carried with her. But she needed to make late-afternoon rounds on campus.

"Would you like to come with me?"

Tatum nodded agreeably.

"Let me know if you see anyone who looks like the man who is following you," Officer Cathy instructed. "You can signal to me by tugging on my sleeve. No need to say anything."

There were not many men on campus, just the headmaster, who always walked in a big hurry, along with some teachers and maintenance workers. No green windbreakers.

They checked doors and looked behind buildings. Tatum liked being seen with Officer Cathy. She thought she'd like to have a job that required wearing a uniform. But not a nurse. Tatum did not like the sight of blood or even being around sick people. That was why she had been sent to the boarding school in the first place. When her mother got sick and had chemo last year, her father said it was time for Tatum to go to prep school, where she wouldn't have to worry about taking care of sick people.

She and Officer Cathy circled around the pond. They picked up trash along the way. Everyone in the school was supposed to do that. "We're all responsible for where we live." That's what the headmaster said at convocation every term. Peppermint candy cellophane, paper cups, and a small, green, rectangular wrapper were in her path near the bench where she liked to sit. Tatum knew about the green wrapper from health class. The teacher had passed out condoms last semester and told the girls to open them up and to put the smooth latex on their thumbs, making them look like sad puppets with no ears or eyes or hair.

She threw away the other trash but kept the condom wrapper in her jeans pocket. Touching it made her feel grown-up, more knowledgeable about the secrets of life.

Officer Cathy didn't ask too many questions along the way. They walked briskly, checking the locks on the doors in the main buildings. It was after five o'clock, and the administrative offices were closed. Together they secured the back and side doors to the residence halls. Students were supposed to use the main entrances after 5 P.M. When they got to Buckley, Tatum's dorm, the basement door was propped open with a brick.

"This is not a good idea," Officer Cathy pointed out, as if accustomed to giving lectures on safety. "Anyone could get in here. Anyone at all."

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Tatum nodded in agreement. She took the brick from the security guard, placing it behind some bushes. "Nobody will be able to find it there."

"I'm going off duty for today. Stop by to see me tomorrow, or call me on your cell phone if you see him again, if he bothers you." Officer Cathy's large, blurry eyes fixed on Tatum's for a solid moment before she turned away. Tatum wished she would hug her. Officer Cathy's arms and chest were strong, not fragile and tight like her mother's had become.

After Officer Cathy disappeared down the sidewalk, Tatum went to the front entrance to the dorm and headed down to the basement side door. She retrieved the brick and propped open the door once more. "Life is transient," Jen had told her. "There is no such thing as security."

Tatum changed into a clean silk blouse, another hand-me-down. On the way to dinner, she checked her mailbox. There was nothing there, not even a postcard from her mother, who sent one almost every day, collected from faraway lands where she'd traveled with her father before he retired from the newspaper—places like Hong Kong, Croatia, India, and the Big Sur. Her mother stored the postcards in a small wooden box along with her formal stationery. She wrote little wobbly messages, sometimes quotations, all across the postcard with no room left for the address. Then, she placed them in an envelope and mailed them to Tatum. Sometimes she sent several postcards in a single mailing with sequential, numbered messages, like those Tatum had received yesterday: "(1) There is a new robin making a nest in the bushes. I hope that she will lay her tiny blue eggs there. (2) And the skinny, hungry babies will be here when you come home. XOXOX your Mother." The postcards provided different views of the glimmering Taj Mahal, which the caption said had been built for love.

Tatum stuck the postcards to her wall with Superglue that would get her written up once the residence counselors realized what she had done. But she didn't care. And Jen didn't seem to mind either. Sometimes she posted them with the writing side exposed, where there were quotations written in her mother's hand from *Alice in Wonderland* or *Little Women.* She had wanted a new picture of her mother, even if she didn't have hair anymore. But her father would not send her one, not even by e-mail. At spring break her mother had worn a lovely Asian scarf around her head, maybe from Hong Kong, with interwoven Oriental colors. When Tatum returned to campus, she'd begun wearing Jen's striped scarf; soon afterward the man started following her.

"Do you want to sit with us?" These were the pretty girls who liked to have hush-hush parties with beer in the study room of the dorm. Jen was always with them, and she scooted over to make another place. Tatum sat down next to her, and Jen adjusted the

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scarf around Tatum's neck.

"Like that." She loosened the ends. "So it doesn't look like it's strangling you to death. Now you can breathe." Tatum felt Jen watching her closely as she took a deep breath.

"Have you seen him again?" one of the pretty girls asked her. Tatum thought she might like to get some new glasses like Officer Cathy's so she'd look extra smart, and they'd ask her opinion on all kinds of things. She could explain everything she knew—about how feelings can become whatever memory you need them to be.

Tatum shook her head. She was not supposed to talk about him with the other girls. Officer Cathy said she would do the talking as part of her investigation. Rumors on campus can rage out of control.

"My sister once had some people follow her at the mall. They stole her purse. She never got it back again," one of the girls at the end of the table volunteered.

"We thought my younger brother got kidnapped once when we couldn't find him," another girl stated. "But he'd fallen asleep in the car." She paused to chew on a cherry tomato. "Good thing the windows were open, or he might have suffocated."

"Did you know that they might let that guy John Hinckley out of jail?" Jen volunteered. "Or I guess he's in a loony bin. He's the one who tried to kill Ronald Reagan. He's crazy." Reagan had been President before Tatum was born, before they all were born. Everyone, even Jen with her Suchness, wanted to tell a scary story.

"I found something down by the pond, near the bench." Tatum pulled the condom wrapper out of her pocket and tossed it onto the table next to the butter. All of the girls gazed at it as if it were a sacred relic.

"You touched it?" Jen whispered incredulously.

"It's just the wrapper." Tatum replied. The dark-green rectangle was ripped carefully along the top. One of the girls pushed at it with her fork. Someone snickered. "Maybe that should go in the school paper, too. Under lost and found. You'll be famous, Tatum, one way or another. Just you wait and see."

Tatum picked the wrapper back up and stuffed it in her pocket. She tugged on the scarf as she stood up. "I need to get to the library to finish my history project." She didn't want to be the last one left at the table.

Some of the other girls grabbed their backpacks. Tatum walked out first. She liked being at the front rather than the back of the group. She fingered the torn wrapper in her pocket.

On her way to the library, Tatum called her mother on her cell phone. Usually, she got up out of bed for dinner. They ate late at home. Her father answered.

"She's still sleeping," he stated quietly. Tatum would not ask how she was doing. Her father sighed on the other end of the phone as

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if he, too, had just gotten up from a long nap. "I'll tell her you called."

"Dad." She paused. Her father was older than her mother by a lot, maybe twenty years. He was the one who was supposed to die first. "Yes, Tate?"

"There's a man following me on campus."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Again?" he added quietly.

"They wrote about it for the school newspaper. The security guard, Officer Cathy, she's on the lookout for him." Her father was silent for a minute.

"SOP," Tatum added.

"Well, Tatum, it sounds like you're doing the right thing. Notifying the authorities." He paused to swallow. "I'll call the headmaster in the morning."

His voice sounded crackly, like that of an old man. He was not as tall as he used to be. His gray hair had grown wiry and wild, not cut short like when he traveled for the newspaper. As the foreign correspondent, he had seen the world, both its good and bad parts. Newspapers were his source of reality. What got printed there was what had actually happened.

"Dad?" She wanted to tell him something else, something that would make a memory for her mother, too. But he'd already hung up. She wanted him to tell her mother about the colorful, striped scarf she wore around her neck. Tatum wanted her mother to know that she was letting her hair grow extra long. And that she washed it every other day. She wanted her mother to know that she was taking walks with Officer Cathy and about the history project. And she wanted her mother to know about Suchness, about everything that was happening, even as her own world was slowing down.

Instead of going to the library, Tatum headed back to her room. She removed her bed comforter, satin pillow, and secret notebook. Down in the basement, the door was no longer propped open. Tatum recovered the brick from behind the bush and placed it in the doorway again. She walked to the pond, to the bench near where she had found the condom wrapper. Lying down, she tucked the comforter all around her. The sky was dusky, nearly dark, with the wind making tiny, turbulent waves on the lake. The air smelled fresh, like the first hope of springtime.

Officer Cathy, Jen, her father, the headmaster, the pretty girls, or anybody else who bothered to look would find her on the bench. And Tatum would tell them about the man—about how he had been there too, his arms holding her tight, his legs tangled up with hers, his face close, breathing hot breaths on her chest. When morning came she'd write down the memory, that feeling of Suchness, all deep and hard inside of her. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Other Half

by Mick Herron

When she'd finished with the computer she returned to the bathroom, set the boiler's timer to constant, and collected the shirt: a black silk, collarless affair evidently saved for special occasions. She carried this downstairs, turning the thermostat up as high as it would go as she passed, then hung it on the kitchen door while she sorted out her remaining tasks. The clock on the wall read Nearly Time To Go, but she didn't need telling; her body was already sending out signals—pinpricks at the back of the neck, a fizziness in the blood; the on-the-edge messages the primal self transmits at useful moments. She'd promised herself ten minutes, max, and they were almost up. Kitchen jobs done, she retrieved the shirt and let herself out the back door, locking it behind her with the key from the hook next to the cooker. For a moment she stood fixed to the spot, gauging the quality of the neighbourhood noise. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. She released the breath she'd been holding, then placed the key on the window ledge before looking down at the shirt in her hand. "Now, what are we going to do with you?" she asked; though if the truth were told, she already knew.

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"Reformatted," Joe repeated.

"The hard drive, yes."

"Which is bad," he ventured.

"You don't get computers, do you, Joe?"

Joe Silvermann shook his head regretfully. While he didn't mind that he didn't get computers, he hated disappointing people.

Tom Parker said, "Basically, Tessa wiped it. Erased all the work stored in the machine plus all the software loaded on it, which, trust me, comes to an expensive piece of damage on its own. Even without her other party pieces."

"Such as the heating."

"I was only away two days. Imagine if I'd been gone all week? Or a fortnight?"

"Or a long cruise," Joe suggested. "Four weeks, sometimes six. Two months, even. I've seen adverts."

"It doesn't bear thinking about," Tom said. "House was like a heatwave as it was. The bill'll be ruinous. Then there were the kitchen japes. Fridge and freezer doors swinging open, oven on full blast. And the phone, she'd left the phone off the hook. After dialing one of those premium-rate chat lines. Jesus!"

"It's not good," Joe agreed, shaking his head. "Not good at all."

"And what she did with my shirt . . ."

He'd been steadily growing redder through this recital, and Joe was worried Tom Parker might have a seizure or something; perhaps a mild apoplectic episode requiring medical intervention. He was a youngish man, so this wasn't desperately likely, but as Joe's first-aid expertise stopped at dialing 999, he thought it best to steer conversation away from the shirt. "You'll forgive my saying so, I know," he said. "Not only because we are friends, but because you're a fair man. But you keep saying Tessa did this. Did she perhaps leave a note? Or some other declaration of some description?"

"Of course she didn't, Joe. We're talking criminal damage here."

"She seemed a nice young woman," he mourned.

"Well," Tom Parker said, "don't they all? To start with."

He'd first met Tom Parker three months previously, at a French Market in Gloucester Green, where they'd fallen into conversation over the relative merits of the olives on offer. Tom had been with

Private eyes Joe Silvermann and Zoë Boehm star in several of Mick Herron's novels but they make their first appearance in *EQMM* this month. Their creator was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. He currently lives in Oxford and commutes to work in London. His highly acclaimed first novel *Down Cemetery Road* was published in 2003. His latest book to see print in the U.S. is *Reconstruction* (Soho, April 2008). ¶

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Tessa—Tessa Greenlaw—and Joe, in the way of such meetings, had assumed them an established couple. He himself had been with Zoë at the time, and for all he knew, Tom and Tessa made the same assumption about them. Not that Zoë had been on the spot when the conversation started, of course—she had a way of bringing such encounters to an early close—but by the time she returned from a nearby wine stall, Joe was already ushering his new friends in the direction of a coffee bar.

"You'll never stop collecting strays, will you?" she'd said later.

"Hardly strays. He runs a language school. She is an NHS, what are they calling them now? Managers? Hardly strays, Zoë."

"It's the kind of thing old people do."

Joe would never get to be old, but neither of them knew that yet. Besides, as he said, the pair weren't strays: Tom Parker was mid thirties, with a relaxed, confident way which expressed itself in his clothing, his smile, and the direct expression he wore when he shook Joe's hand. "Joe," he'd said. "Good to meet you. This is Tessa." Tessa was a few years younger: a sweet-faced blonde woman whose small, squarish, black-framed spectacles gave the impression that she was trying to look less attractive than she was, though to Joe's mind they made her look rather sexy. While waiting for coffee, the group swapped life details.

"I've never met a private detective," Tom had said.

Joe shrugged modestly.

"Well, now you've met two," Zoë told him.

"Do you solve many crimes?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'solve,'" Joe said carefully. "And also 'crimes.'"

"It sounds fascinating," Tessa said. She had a rather breathy voice, to Joe's ear.

"It sounds fascinating," Zoë echoed sarcastically as they made their way home later.

"She was trying to show an interest, that's all. I thought they were a nice couple."

Though as it turned out, they were no longer a couple by the time Joe next encountered Tom.

This had been in a bar in the city centre, where Joe had been watering a police contact of his, one Bob Poland, who had no useful information on a young runaway case Joe was working on but managed to drag it out to five large scotches anyway. Joe himself had been nursing a beer, because there was no point getting competitive with a thirsty cop. He was only halfway through it when Bob had to leave—his shift was up—so was unfolding his newspaper when Tom Parker walked through the door. His language school, Joe remembered as he raised a hand in greeting, was just round the corner.

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"You remember me?"

"Of course—Joe, isn't it?"

"Silvermann."

"From the olive stall."

"Well—"

"The private eye, don't worry. I remember."

He often dropped in here for a drink once the working day was done, he told Joe. The pair settled at a table by the window.

"And Tessa, how is she?"

"Oh, I'm not seeing her anymore."

"Tom! No! What happened?"

"Well, nothing: Christ, Joe, it's not the death of romance or anything. We dated for a while and now we're not. Simple as that." Something in his expression, though, suggested it wasn't that simple.

"But . . . "

"But what?"

But nothing, Joe had to admit. Nothing he wanted to say out loud. That they had seemed a nice couple, and that nice couples ought to stick together, if only to set an example to everyone else. "Should I—would you like another drink?" When all else failed, offer hospitality. "Should I go to the bar?"

"Joe, they have table service." Tom raised a hand for the waitress. "Why do it yourself when you can pay someone else to do it? How about you, you want the other half?"

"Perhaps I will."

Tom ordered their drinks, then went on, "Besides, she's unstable. Was right from the start."

"Unstable?"

"I used to get phone calls from her in the middle of the night. Checking up. That I was alone, and where I ought to be."

Joe clucked his tongue, shook his head. "Late-night phone calls. Zoë and I, we had a spate awhile back. They get tired, they give up. You're sure this was Tessa?"

"Sometimes she'd arrive on my doorstep unexpectedly, or be waiting when I left work. You ever been stalked, Joe?"

"Is it stalking, this? Not just . . . "

"Just what?"

Joe shrugged. "Perhaps she just wants to be with you."

"Feels like stalking to me, mate." He shook his head. "It's a hell of a world, Joe, I'm telling you. And most of its problems caused by women."

Well, maybe half, Joe conceded. If you ignored war and famine and stuff.

They fell to talking about other things. The next Joe heard about Tessa, Tom was in his office, outlining the damage.

He had taken a cigarette from a pocket but didn't light it; just held

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it between finger and thumb as he spoke. "Those phone calls? They never stopped. Oh, she wouldn't speak, but it was her. Middle of the night, and I'm getting woken up to be given the silent treatment. Or not woken up, if you know what I mean."

"Sometimes you're already awake," Joe guessed.

"Not alone, either. You can imagine the damper that puts on proceedings."

"She sounds unhappy."

"And I care? She's freaking nuts, Joe. And driving me crazy while she's at it."

"Have you been to the police?"

"What good would that do? Look. I know it was Tessa, you know it was Tessa. Bloody Tessa knows it was Tessa. But knowing isn't proving. We get into an I said/she said situation, the best that'll happen is she'll get told to watch her step by the boys in blue. Meanwhile, I'm still paying the bills on her domestic terrorism, thanks a bunch."

"How did she get in?"

"In?"

"To your house," Joe explained. "She didn't look, pardon my saying, like a housebreaker."

"Oh, right. No, she didn't need to be. We'd swapped keys, but she never gave it back. Claimed she did, but she didn't."

"And your locks? Have you changed your locks?"

"Well, I have now, Joe. But that's a little late to help."

Joe nodded, as a change from shaking his head. There'd been a crime, and Tom seemed certain he'd identified the culprit. But it wasn't clear what Joe was expected to do about it.

Tom said, "That was my favourite shirt, too. Bought it in Italy. It's not like I can just pop out and buy another."

"It's not . . . salvageable? No, sorry, forget I spoke. Of course it's not."

Tom leaned forward. His unlit cigarette jammed meaning into every syllable. "She blocked the sewer pipe with it, Joe. First I knew about it, the toilet's backing up. 'Course it's not bloody salvageable."

"Would you like coffee? Tea?"

"Neither. Not right now."

"You're upset, yes. Your shirt and all the rest, plus the sense of being invaded. I can see you'd want to talk to somebody about it."

"But why you."

"That's what I was wondering, Tom, yes. Why me?"

So Tom told him.

A homeless man made his pitch by an entrance to the Covered Market: tea towel in front of him for contributions to his well-being, he sat crosslegged, back to the wall, face obscured by a hood. A young Alsatian lay next to him, its head on his knee. Lots of home-

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less people—and there were lots; they seemed to multiply faster than any housing shortage could account for—lots of them had dogs, Joe had noticed, which was a detail which, if not a silver lining, at least provided a little insulation, he liked to think. There was comfort in knowing that no matter how hard you'd fallen, love was still available. He'd said as much to Zoë once, and she'd looked at him as if he were mad, which wasn't an unusual expression for Zoë.

"They don't keep dogs for something to love, Joe. They keep dogs so they've something to shout at. Something they can get angry with, which just has to sit and take it."

Which might or might not have been true, but one thing was certain: Having heard it said, Joe would never look at a homeless man and his dog in quite the same way again.

"The glass is always half empty, isn't it, Zoë?" he'd said sadly.

"No, the glass is cracked," she'd told him. "And there's no way I'm drinking from a cracked glass."

Anyway, the dog he was looking at was the same he'd seen yesterday, because this was the homeless guy's regular hangout, and this particular entrance to Oxford's Covered Market was right by the doorway to Tessa Greenlaw's gym. Or the gym Tessa Greenlaw was a member of. Joe had spent long enough watching it to make such pointless clarifications to himself, as if somewhere inside his own head was a not entirely bright third party, in constant need of updating. Tessa Greenlaw came here once her workday was done, or had done so both days Joe had been following her. *Surveilling*, he amended. "Following" had a stalkerish air. And yesterday, after leaving, she'd done nothing more complicated than head straight home, giving Joe a tricky moment when he'd found himself boarding the same bus—but it had been crowded, and he'd sat where she couldn't see his face, and besides, they'd only encountered each other once, months ago. Chances were, all she'd have would be one of those vague city moments at the sight of a face from a forgotten context. And if that had happened, she hadn't let on.

Tonight, though, there was no rush for the bus. Instead, on leaving the gym Tessa Greenlaw headed south, down St. Aldate's. Giving her time to get ahead, Joe peeled himself from his hiding place, thought for a moment about popping over the road to slip a quid to the boy with the dog, decided he didn't have time, and set off in Tessa's wake.

It was hardly a surprise. How many places could she have been headed? Well, okay, she could have been going anywhere—but a short distance down St. Aldate's, then a left turn off the main road, and what you reached was the building that housed Tom Parker's language school.

This wasn't a busy thoroughfare. Joe couldn't have followed Tessa along it without being spotted. But opposite the lane's

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entrance, on St. Aldate's itself, was a bench for the weary, from which Joe had a clear view of Tessa Greenlaw coming to a halt by the language school; of Tessa checking her watch, then leaning against the wall of the building opposite, looking up at the second-floor window where Tom had his office.

Joe spread his newspaper over his knees, in case Tessa noticed him.

He timed it at eleven minutes. Eleven minutes before Tom Parker came out. During this time, Tessa grew restless; checked her watch a number of times; fiddled through her bag for something she didn't find. She was wearing the same glasses Joe had admired the first time he'd met her—only time, he amended; you couldn't call this "meeting"—and her hair was shorter, but what he mostly noticed was that she seemed, what might the word be—frazzled? Yes: She seemed frazzled. As if things were not going her way lately, and the directions they had chosen instead were stretching her thin.... Zoë would probably point out that Tessa had just been to the gym, which might account for it. But still: She looked frazzled.

Joe was staring straight at her when she looked his way. He dropped his eyes to the newspaper, made a bit of a thing about turning a page. When he risked another glance, Tom was in the lane, too.

"You saw?"

"I saw, yes."

"That's the fourth time. No, *fifth*. She's mad, Joe. Complete mentalist."

"Mentalist." Joe wasn't sure he'd encountered the term. "Certainly, she does not give the impression of being, ah, stable."

He hadn't been able to hear everything, but that she'd been shouting was clear enough. *Bastard* had floated Joe's way. And all the while Tom had been making soothing gestures in the air; smiling softly but never quite touching her, as if Tessa were a cornered animal in spitting mood, unclear of its own best choices. When he'd reached at last for her sleeve she'd pulled her arm away angrily and stormed down the lane, away from Joe. Slowly, he'd folded his newspaper and stood. When Tom reached him, he led the way to the bar without a word.

Now he said, "And has there been any *pattern*, any particular sequence to the way in which she comes and, ah, lurks outside your workplace?"

"I'm not sure. Would it make a difference?"

"Probably not," Joe admitted.

"You're thinking some kind of PMT thing?"

Uncomfortable with this direction, Joe shook his head. "Not really." Truth was, he had no idea what questions to ask, or what answers would help. Insights into the female psyche weren't his specialty. And if he'd ever claimed them to be, it wasn't like the notion would

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withstand five minutes of Zoë's scrutiny. "Did you confront her about her invasion of your property?"

"Did she give the impression of being up for a discussion?"

"I couldn't hear," Joe explained. "Traffic. Distance. Plus, she was shouting and you were speaking softly. Neither was an ideal volume."

"Well, trust me, she was in no mood for answering questions. More than likely, she'd find a way of blaming it on me, anyway. You had much to do with madwomen, Joe?"

Loyally, Joe denied it.

"Lucky you."

She'd looked frazzled, he remembered. It wasn't such a stretch to colour her mad. "What was she saying?"

Tom Palmer ran a hand through his hair: a boyish gesture, not without charm. "That we belong together. That I was just being stupid, and should come to my senses. That *I* should come to *my* senses." He shook his head in wonderment. "A bloody baby. We're not even in a relationship, for God's sake."

"Does she have parents? Someone who could perhaps talk to her—"

"Well, I don't know, do I? We weren't playing happy families, Joe. We were only together for a couple of weeks."

"An official complaint, perhaps? Now that I've paid witness to this stalking, this harassment, perhaps you want me to . . . accompany you to the police station?"

Tom barked a sudden laugh. "You've never actually been a copper, have you, Joe?"

"Never. Not ever."

"But you talk the talk. No, I don't want you to accompany me to the station, thanks anyway. I want something more direct than that. I want you to put a stop to it. To all her crap."

Joe had been afraid that's where this was leading. "You think she'll listen to me?" He was older than Tessa, true—could easily be her father—and perhaps a little elder wisdom was what she needed: But still, he was afraid. Not of confronting a madwoman; more of being mortally embarrassed. "There is a law," he suggested. "The Protection from Harassment Act?"

"I know," Tom said. "You think that's going to carry weight? Quote section thirteen, paragraph six at her, and watch enlightenment dawn?" He leaned forward. "She's barking, Joe. You've seen what she's like, waiting round my office to harangue me when I leave. Not to mention she seriously messed me about, wiped my computer. I like things ordered, Joe. This was out of order. So. Are you going to help or not? I mean, that's what you do, right? You're a private eye. You take on clients."

"Yes," Joe sighed. "It's what I do. I take on clients."

"Good." Tom passed a key across the table. "I want you to mess her place up, Joe. Same way she messed mine. Fair's fair, right?"

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"I suppose it is," Joe agreed. "Fair's fair. Yes."

Tessa left home for work at nine-fifteen. It was all right for some, Joe noted, a judgment tempered by the knowledge that if he himself didn't reach the office before eleven, it wasn't like anyone would notice. As it was, this morning he'd been up at seven; by half-past, had been slumped twenty yards down the road from Tessa's front door, his trusty newspaper on the car seat next to him, in case a disguise was called for. Was it really necessary for him to observe, first-hand, Tessa's departure? Yes, it was. If he was going to let himself into her place with the key Tom had given him, he wanted proof positive she was off the premises. He figured that was the way Philip Marlowe would have played it, "What would Marlowe do?" being Joe's regular mantra. Marlowe wouldn't take unnecessary risks. Well, that wasn't true. But it was the answer Joe wanted, which was substantially more important.

"You still have this?" he had asked Tom on being given Tessa's door key. "Won't she have changed the lock?"

"Trust me, that'll get you through the door."

"But—"

"Trust me."

So Joe's hand had clamped round the key as if his fist were taking an impression.

Now he straightened in the driving seat as Tessa reached the corner, crossed the road, and headed for her bus stop.

Give her another ten minutes, he thought. It was likely she'd be waiting at least that long; time enough to remember she'd left her purse behind, or her paperback, or any one of a hundred items she never left home without. But his body was in unwilled motion, eager to get this part finished whatever excuses his mind could conjur; his body was excavating itself from its car, brushing the creases from its coat; was pulling its collar up in a completely unsuspicious attempt to obscure its face for the benefit of anyone curtain-twitching, wondering what the guy in the car was up to. Housebreaking in broad daylight was not a game for the nervous. So if he was engaged in it, he couldn't be nervous: QED. Unnervously, then, Joe made his way to Tessa's house; unnervously fished her key from his pocket as he did so; unnervously dropped it as he tripped on the kerb, then had to frantically scrabble before it disappeared down a drain.

Now *that*, Joseph—he chided himself—could so easily have ended in farce.

He looked around. Weirdly, there was nobody in sight; or maybe it was normal; what did Joe know about this particular street at this particular time of the morning? Key safely in his fist, he released a breath just as a bus passed the end of the road, on its way to collect Tessa Greenlaw and transport her out of the area.

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There was no more room for hesitation. He had the key in hand, the door in his sights. What he was about to do was illegal, but would only look unusual if he farted about while doing it. Farting about was not something Marlowe would do. Again, QED.

Nobody shouted as he walked directly to Tessa's door; no sirens blared as he slid the key into its lock. It turned. The door opened.

He was in.

This was only the second time he'd let himself into another person's house without their knowledge—not without help, either time. But this was different. He was here to do damage: well-deserved damage, he reminded himself, as his conscience threatened to kick in—this wasn't random vandalism; it was a message. That's what it was. A message.

Nothing immediately suggested itself as Joe scouted round the ground floor, but once he'd climbed the stairs and discovered what was evidently an office, his next move became clear.

He set to it with a will.

"So why did you break into Tessa's place?"

"I wanted to see if the key worked," Joe explained. He took it from his pocket: a recent copy, shiny and unscratched. "They exchanged keys. He told me that. But when they broke up, he made an extra copy of hers before giving it back. That's why he was so sure she wouldn't have changed the locks. She didn't know he had it."

"It was Tom stalking Tessa, wasn't it?" Zoë said flatly. "Not the other way round."

"It's a creepy thing to do, isn't it? Keep a copy of your ex-girlfriend's key. Except he had me doing the actual stalking," Joe said. "There's the crux, you might call it. The nub." He recalled his self-clarification, following Tessa: that this wasn't *stalking* but *surveillance*. "Prior to persuading me to, I think the word would be *trash* her place. Yes, trash." He recalled for her Tom's words in the bar: "'Why do things yourself when you can pay someone else to do them?' He was talking about fetching drinks. But . . . "

"You discerned a principle," said Zoë.

"You don't seem surprised."

"I didn't much like him."

"Yes, but . . . "

"But what?"

"You don't much like anyone, Zoë," Joe explained. "It's not like you were making an exception."

They were in the office, which was the mostly neutral ground of their marriage.

"Point," Zoë said. "But I thought you were his friend."

"I was, but was he mine? What sort of friend sends you off on a job like that?"

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"The kind who's taking revenge."

"On poor Tessa, yes. She dumped him, I'm assuming."

"Guess so," Zoë said. "And he called her, didn't he? Asked her to meet him after work, once he'd arranged for you to be following her. Then blew her off when he eventually came out. So what you saw was her quite reasonably losing her rag, and you never did hear what he was saying."

"I think so, yes. There are ways someone clever could find out, probably, with phone records and technological trickery, but for myself, yes, I'm sure he faked it."

"Can't think why she went."

"Sometimes women are gentle like that," Joe suggested. "She would have been feeling guilty, perhaps, about dumping him. He maybe made an overture of friendship, or offered to apologise for something."

"And you're not worried she trashed his place first?"

Joe smiled kindly. "Don't you get it? He made that up so I'd be on his side. It didn't happen, Zoë. Not before today. And even if she had—well. I don't like stalkers."

"Me neither," Zoë said. And meant it. Tom had made a pass at her shortly after that meeting in the market, and evidently didn't take rejection well, hence the spate of late-night calls she and Joe had suffered awhile back. But Joe had been right about one thing; there were ways, with technological trickery, that someone clever could find out who'd been making phone calls, no matter that they thought they'd shielded their number. Trashing Tom Parker's place had been her reasonable response. It hadn't occurred to her he'd think Tessa had done it, but the more she listened to Joe, the more she was sure he'd thought no such thing. He'd known it was Zoë. Using Joe—steering him to where he'd do to Tessa what Zoë had done to Tom—was the typical stalker's revenge: manipulative, distant, pleased with itself. His hard luck Joe had seen through him. Not that she was about to share any of this. "How'd you get into his place anyway?"

His second break-in. Harder when you don't have a key.

"Bob Poland helped," he said. For a fee. "Policemen know the strangest things. Like getting through locks."

Zoë nodded. Getting through locks was a skill she'd been tutored in by a local tearaway. "And what did you do?" she asked, curious. "Once you were in?"

There'd been a moment when he'd almost turned and left, overcome by the enormity of it: of breaking in, of wreaking havoc. But then he'd seen Tom's office. *I like things ordered, Joe*, he'd said. And there, to prove it, stood his filing cabinets, with their reams of carefully alphabetised records that Joe had carefully, randomly, reordered. Tom would be hours straightening that lot out. Hours. Maybe days.

"It's better you don't know," he told her.

He was sure that's what Marlowe would have said. ●

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The Good Father

by William Link

It would seem Jay Jordan had made the fatal mistake of turning fifty.

A successful television writer since his twenties, Jay was known to postpone a European vacation if his producer needed an additional rewrite on a *Hill Street Blues.* It was one of the reasons, albeit a minor one, why his marriage went into receivership. And on that one his wife Lynne was, unfortunately, the receiver.

But no sooner he had blown out the candles on his birthday cake than it seemed he'd simultaneously blown out the wires on his phone. He would ask his agent about the lack of current assignments on a Monday and the man (one of his oldest friends) would wish him a happy weekend as they hung up. When his picture was taken down off the wall at the Palm, one of Hollywood's premier steak houses, he knew immediately that the industry was reciting him his Last (W)Rites. All the new work was going to the army of young writers who seemed to love their computers more than their wives or girlfriends.

In partnership with Richard Levinson, William Link was the creator and producer of some of the most popular shows on TV, including *Columbo, Mannix, Ellery Queen,* and *Murder, She Wrote.* For their joint work on such series Levinson and Link received a special Edgar Award and the Ellery Queen Award from MWA, and were three-time winners of the Edgar for Best TV Feature or Mini-series Teleplay.

It was not that Jay was skirting the poverty line. He still owned his ranch house in Sherman Oaks, his once obese stock portfolio, membership at the health and tennis clubs, but his insatiable urge to write was like poison ivy—Ahhh, it was great scratching it even if it drew a little masochistic blood in the process. Goddammit, he had come up the hard way, poor kid from the Bronx, no money to go to college, just this starved monkey on his back, hungering to write, to get his words up there on the screen. Actually, *down* there on the screen since he was a TV scribe. But now . . .

He was sitting in his living room at eleven in the morning,

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unshaven, still in his bathrobe, when his ex called. As usual, she wanted at his wallet. There was always a justifiable reason: Jeffrey (their son) wanted to go to Baja with his friends for a weekend, the roof was leaking again, Jeffrey's dental bills. Legally, he didn't have to pay any of this but she always managed to make him a last-drop-of-blood donor. Even blindfolded, hands tied behind her back, she could unerringly find his guilt button. All this expressed in her usual harridan's voice.

"You never see Jeffrey, you never even saw him in his school's *The Mikado,* and *he* was the Mikado!"

"Gimme a break, I paid for his damn costume."

"But you never *saw* him in it."

She had him there: He saw his son maybe six, seven times a year. He just couldn't relate to the kid, he was too *Californian:* too blond, too tanned, too arrogant even at five and even worse as a teenager. He called Jay "Jay." Where was his respect, treating his father like one of his pot-smoking buddies? Jay had compounded the situation by getting him into a private school filled with the opportunistic offspring of the town's actors, agents, entertainment lawyers. You could catch them in homeroom every morning reading the trades, looking forward to their lattes at lunch.

It was only after he had gotten Lynne off the phone with his usual promise of forthcoming lucre that the idea hit him. It came unheralded like most of his best story ideas, a gift-wrapped missive from the subconscious. But it had its downside: It meant a talk with the blood recipient. A very serious, probably hard-sell session which would finally give the kid, not being too Freudian about it, an upper *cajone* in their relationship. Could he deal with that? You betcha!

He always dreaded going back to the house he lost to Lynne in the marriage settlement: a faux-Tudor on Hillcrest in Beverly Hills. He even avoided driving by it if possible. But this was business!

In his ex's now over-decorated living room (God, some of the furnishings actually looked Iranian!), he confronted Jeffrey, who sat sprawled on a sofa, scruffy in soiled T-shirt and cargo pants, drinking a soda. He was regarding Jay with a contemplative smirk like a used-car salesman evaluating his newest victim.

Before Jay could begin, Jeffrey said, "Jay, I've been thinking. You know, my name, Jeffrey Jordan—it's a little over-the-top alliterative. Wouldn't you say? It gets embarrassing."

Jay wanted to throw up. *But this was business.* "You might have a point there," he managed to concede. But he loved the fact that his son had used the word "alliterative." Maybe they read more than the trades at that showbiz school.

"I want to change it," Jeffrey said emphatically.

"That can be done," Jay agreed. "We can do that legally, no problem. Let me know."

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"Great. You know what I'd like to change it to?"

Jay shrugged. "What?"

"Hunter. Hunter Jordan. Cool, don't you think?"

"Very cool. Now—ah—I'd like to discuss something else."

Jeffrey, future Hunter, rolled over on the sofa. He popped himself up, almost into Jay's face. "Lay it on, Jay."

Jay explained the situation in television, the young demographic the industry thirsted for, the dangers that faced Jeffrey and Lynne since the industry had pressed his delete button. Think of it—the lack of tuition money, the perks like Baja, etc. No new car next year. The newly christened Hunter without a Hummer!

If his son was disturbed by Jay's dissertation, his face remained unperturbed. He took a hearty swig of his Big Red, said, "So what's the climax of the plot? You're the writer."

"An impersonation. You."

Jeffrey, ex-Mikado, straightened up on the sofa. "Me?"

"You go in, pitch the story to the producer. You get the assignment and I write the script. They'll never know the old fart did the writing."

Jeffrey pondered this, then his smirk surfaced again. "These guys are idiots? I never pitched anything in my life. They'd be on me like my shorts."

Jay confided that most were bereft of brain cells. He would coach him on exactly how to tell the story, the little tricks to charm them out of their Guccis. If they wanted to buy the story and the teleplay, they would make a deal with Jay's agent, who would be in on the scam.

Jay leaned closer, grabbed the Big Red can from Jeffrey, took a swig. Chums. Fellow conspirators. "Think it over, I'll buzz you tomorrow." He quickly got up to go.

"Just a minute," Jeffrey said. "Cool it. What's the back-end here?"

Money. Always the goddamn money. "I'll give you points, a percentage, we'll work it out." He started out again.

"Not so fast. I got this rotten tough lit teacher, Mr. Haviland? Suppose you write me my next essay assignment for this bozo. Quid pro quo. Huh?"

Jay shrugged. "Quid pro quo. We got a deal—*Hunter.*"

It was easier than they'd both thought. Jay was his new teacher for a week, his Marine drill sergeant, drumming the story into his head, even how to sit (directly facing the producer, not his clones), no shave, his wardrobe (the scruffy T-shirt and cargo pants were perfecto). Jay was getting the distinct impression that the quid pro quo was more important to his son than the promise of compensation. He was actually beginning to *like* this California mutant he had somehow, improbably, hatched. The boy's light-switch, on-and-off smirk seemed self-defensive now, hiding an innate shyness and insecurity.

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Jay nervously drove him to the studio for the pitch meeting, parking right inside the gate because the studio cop remembered him from the "old days." Last year?!

Jeffrey came out an hour later in an ecstatic trance. "They loved it," he said. "Got a weed?"

"You never know if they loved it. These guys invented duplicity."

But they did—love it.

Jay's agent made the deal and he was happily pounding out the script, day and night, on his old Remington. He would never switch to a computer, words had to be driven into the paper, like Faulkner said, nails into wood.

Meanwhile Haviland had assigned Jeffrey an essay, "What is Morality?" Relishing the irony, Jay knocked it out in an hour, an easy two-Pepsi chore.

The producers finally read Jeffrey's script, liked it even more than their on-lot parking stalls, his prodigy winding up with a multiple assignment on the show. Those bastards, Jay thought, I've still got the juice but they've forced me to pimp my own flesh and blood.

Jay took his family to Spago for a victory celebration. Wolfgang himself dropped by the table and Jay proclaimed that his boy Hunter was a genius, the newest hot TV writer while he was still in high school, no less. Later a mountain of desserts covered every inch of the tablecloth, gratis.

On the way home, Jay asked his son if he was thinking at all of what he eventually wanted to do for a living. Writing, maybe?

"Nah," Jeffrey said. "I'd like to be a doctor someday. Do something of value with my life. I hear there's going to be a real shortage of doctors."

Boy, did I misjudge this kid, Jay thought. Serves me right for being some kind of shadow father, wrapping him in long-arm-proffered gifts instead of real paternal love.

"That's going to take a lot of hard study," Jay said. "Are you prepared?"

"I know it's hard, but I'm up for it."

Jay was working on a new script for the show when the phone rang. The voice was scratchy like an old phonograph record. "Mr. Jordan. This is Richard Haviland, your son's lit teacher?"

"Yes. Sure. Jeffrey's told me about you."

"I think it's important we get together, Mr. Jordan. Are you free to come by the school tomorrow night at eight o'clock? I'll be working late."

"Ahh—I think so, yes. Could you tell me what it's about?"

"That best be discussed when you see me."

Ominous. "Awright. Fine. I'll be there."

Jeffrey was as puzzled as Jay. He had submitted his ghost-written essay, but Haviland hadn't announced the grades yet or discussed them in class. "He's the proto-nerd, Jay, halitosis, flatulence,

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the whole putrid package. Nobody wants to sit in the front row."

The following night Jay was made even more uneasy by the deserted school building, lights still scowling out of empty offices. Haviland was sitting at a brightly lit desk in a crowd of shadows, a tall, monochrome figure as emaciated as a residual check. Jay felt like a schoolboy, called on the carpet for his unruly class behavior.

"Good evening," Haviland said. He was no more than forty-five but already graying. He didn't extend his hand. "We have a problem," he said, eschewing any formalities.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Your son Jeffrey submitted an essay paper. It was quite obvious he didn't write it."

He was going to have to tough this one out. "Hard to believe. My boy's a very fine television writer. He has a three-script assignment on one of the best series."

"I know all about that," Haviland said in his scratchy, slightly condescending tones, "he told me. But I looked you up on the Net. I'm afraid you are the only writer in the family."

"Afraid?"

Haviland pushed his papers away. "This is a serious offense. I will have to report it to the dean."

Jay groaned inwardly. So now private schools had "deans." "You'd have to prove Jeffrey didn't write it."

"Easily done. Trust me."

Stalemate. Mexican standoff. Jay held his ground in silence, trying not to blink. Let your opponent speak first. If that wasn't one of Machiavelli's primary rules, it should be. And then he spied the suspicious stack of Hollywood trade papers on the desk.

"I think this problem is more serious than you believe, Mr. Jordan." He saw that Jay's eyes were fixated on the stack. "My fiancée's brother is an associate producer on the series your son is writing for. A most unhappy coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

It was possible Jay's old, recurring ulcer was ready for its close-up. "So what?"

"I think you wrote Jeffrey's essay and you also wrote the script he sold to this television show. I would hate to reveal that fact to my fiancée's brother."

Jay took his time smiling, letting it slowly uncoil like a snake. "I don't like to disappoint you, Haviland, but they won't give a damn. They need good scripts, they have air dates."

"So I should go ahead and tell him?"

"That would be irresponsible and malicious. I don't think you'd do that if you were compensated." Money, always money. "Am I right?"

The teacher met his eyes. "I'm beginning to do a little script writing myself, but it means working mostly nights and weekends. I would like to take a sabbatical and really get the job done. But that would mean I'd have to be subsidized for a while. Are you fol-

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lowing, Mr. Jordan?"

"Like a heat-seeking missile." Thank God he had years of training keeping his anger in check, a necessity in the television snake pit. "What's the price tag on this 'sabbatical'?"

"That is open to negotiation."

Jay already had a plan. "Let me think about it."

He met the next day with Dave Kramer, the show-runner that his son had his deal with, a stocky young ex-New Yorker who wore the mandatory producer's beard. "Your son's doing a great job for us," he said. "You should be proud."

Jay said casually, "He's not writing the scripts. I am."

Just as casual: "We know."

It was a brief but very pleasant meeting. As Jay had suspected, Kramer couldn't give a damn about the masquerade. He had figured no sixteen-year-old, inexperienced kid could write scripts of that quality so it had to be his father, the old, dependable pro.

Jay phoned Haviland, said they should meet again. He had dinner with Jeffrey, this time without his mother.

"Dave Kramer knows about our subterfuge," he said, "but he doesn't give a damn."

Jeffrey was unfazed. "He's a pretty cool dude. So it's just business as usual?"

"You got it." He took a sip of his martini and scrutinized his only child. The boy actually had his hair combed tonight and was wearing a very presentable sports jacket with a crisp shirt. "Are you *sure* the writing bug hasn't infected you?"

Jeffrey smiled. "I guess Mom's genes cut it off at the pass. Nah, I'm still looking at med school."

"Y'know, I'm starting to get impressed with you, Hunter. I thought you were turning out to be one of those Beverly Hills trust-fund brats. Maybe we'll take a vacation this summer together. Just you and your ghost writer."

Jeffrey smiled. "That'd be cool."

Jay got a sudden lump in his throat when Jeffrey called him "Dad" instead of "Jay" when he dropped him off at his ex-house.

He took his time getting gas and then drove straight to his meeting with Haviland. He thought he wasn't nervous but he kept checking the time on his dashboard display.

The school was almost deserted again except for a workman buffing the entranceway floor to a mirrorlike sheen. He went directly to Haviland's classroom, his heels kicking up echoes like warning gunshots.

Tonight Haviland had the remains of a Chinese takeout on his desk. He was briskly napkining the grease off his hands when Jay came in. There were no amicable preliminaries.

Jay said, "I told the head honcho on Jeffrey's show that I was the guy writing the scripts. He couldn't care less. So I guess that robs

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you of any leverage you thought you had. I guess I didn't know blackmailer was on your curriculum vitae."

Haviland broke open a fortune cookie, read the slip, ate the cookie. "Why should people like you be granted the license of immoral behavior and deny it to people like me? Are you the liege in the castle who governs by feudal law?"

He smiled for the very first time, a shred of chop suey hanging off his lip.

"You call my old ranch house in the Valley a castle?" Jay went to the door. More gunshots. "I don't think we'll be seeing each other anymore, Haviland. Except maybe at a PTA meeting."

"I still have leverage."

"Is that what your fortune cookie said?"

"Your son cheated on his essay. That will be brought up to the dean and then duly recorded on his record. No college will admit him. Med school later? I don't think so."

Jay had to grit his teeth to staunch his fury. "That was the ace up your sleeve."

"That was the royal flush up my sleeve." Smile number two.

"And if I subsidize your sabbatical I guess that will be just the never-ending start of the money flow—in your direction."

Haviland took his time clearing away the scattered Chinese debris. "Think what you want."

Fuming, Jay left.

He sat in his car in the parking lot until the cleaning crew turned out most of the remaining lights in the building and left. There was only one other car in the lot: It had to be the teacher's.

When he saw the thin figure come from the building and walk slowly over to the car, he scraped his mind clean of any thoughts as he turned on the motor, but not his lights. The car roared forth and struck the man head-on, his briefcase flying off into the night. Jay never looked at his dashboard display on the way home.

Two days later, in the holding cell, his lawyer and his ex gave him a grim good morning. The police had found his name in Haviland's book as his last appointment and when they had gone to Jay's house to question him they had spotted his damaged car. And the workman who'd been buffing the floor when he entered the school identified him.

"Vehicular homicide," his lawyer said. "It's a damn serious charge. Jesus, Jay, why the hell would you drive away from an accident?"

When the lawyer left, Jay spoke to Lynne, told her exactly what had happened, his voice hoarse, halting. She stared at him, grief-stricken, and took his hands through the bars.

There were tears in her eyes but she managed to smile.

"You're a lousy murderer, Jay, but you sure as hell turned into a good father." ●

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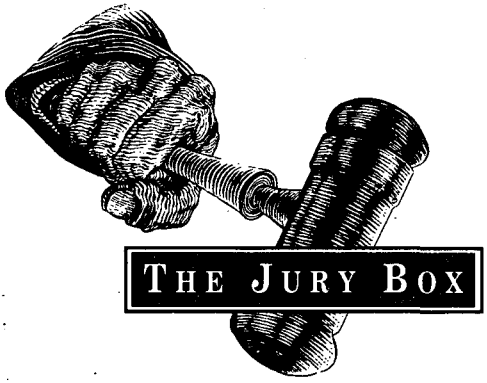

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Perennial bestseller Dean Koontz's two most recent books have several elements in common apart from expert writing, construction, pacing, and suspense: a strong demarcation between good and evil, darkness and light; strong male and female leads with secrets in their past and murderous sociopaths as their adversaries; valid if curmudgeonly cultural criticism, a plea for old-fashioned morality, and a belief in the psychic sensitivities of dogs.

**** Dean Koontz: *The Darkest Evening of the Year,* Bantam, $27. Amy Redwing, whose life mission is the rescue of golden retrievers, takes architect boyfriend Brian McCarthy along on an especially dangerous operation that changes both their lives in a thematically ambitious and deftly plotted supernatural thriller that represents the author at the top of his game. Numerous sidelong references to a recently deceased American satirical novelist, who is never named but whose characters provide aliases to one pernicious miscreant, help drive home the theme.

*** Dean Koontz: *The Good Guy,* Bantam, $27. The grimly farcical opening premise might have appealed to Cornell Woolrich: title character Tim Carrier, minding his own business in a neighborhood bar, is mistaken first for a hired killer, then for the real killer's client. Instead of reporting it to the police, which he would do if the hired killer were not apparently himself a cop, he launches an effort to save the targeted victim, a novelist who claims not to know why anyone would want to kill her.

**** Gianrico Carofiglio: *Reasonable Doubts,* translated from the Italian by Howard Curtis, Bitter Lemon, $14.95. Even without the added benefit of elucidating the Italian legal system, the series about defense lawyer Guido Guerrieri would be one of the most rewarding in the current market. In this third case, he takes on the appeal of a convicted drug trafficker while struggling with two

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potential conflicts of interest: a grudge against his client over an ugly boyhood incident and a growing attraction to the client's beautiful wife. With rueful humor, complex characters, clever legal maneuvering, and brilliant final arguments on both sides, this ranks high among the courtroom novels of recent memory.

*** Cora Harrison: *My Lady Judge,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. Fans of Peter Tremayne's Sister Fidelma should enjoy the first case for an Irish lawyer-sleuth of a few centuries later. In 1509, the main problem for Mara, Brehon (i.e. judge, lawgiver, investigator) of the west coast kingdom of Burren, involves the murder of one of her young law students during a traditional Celtic celebration. But she is also seen in action adjudicating cases including a stolen cow, custody of a mentally impaired youth, an accusation of rape, and ratification of a marriage contract. Along with the fresh background comes one of the best examples of classical puzzle plotting in recent memory.

*** Joan Druett: *Deadly Shoals,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. Also distinguished for classical puzzle, good writing, and fulsome historical detail (bibliography included) is the fourth case for Wiki Coffin, son of an American seaman father and a Maori mother, who does his detecting as a multi-purpose member of the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition of the late 1830s. Helping a New England whaling captain look for his stolen schooner in the Rio Negro area of Patagonia, Wiki encounters a wider plot. One of the two major surprises, while more than generously clued, is pretty unbelievable.

*** Paul Charles: *Sweetwater,* Brandon/Dufour, $29.95 hardcover, $15.95 trade paper. The series about Christy Kennedy is a unique one that should be better known to American readers. The Ulster-born London cop's style of interrogating suspects has a touch of Nicolas Freeling's Van der Valk, but Golden Age buffs will put even higher value on his creator's classical plotting style, including this time an elaborate murder method that might have appealed to John Dickson Carr, John Rhode, or Dorothy L. Sayers. The victim of multiple, possibly ritualistic stab wounds is Harry Ford, a Kennedy acquaintance whose complicated relations with a small group of friends from college days yield several potential motives.

*** Duane Swierczynski: *The Crimes of Dr. Watson,* Quirk, $24.95. In a series of letters written during the time of Sherlock Holmes's disappearance, Watson describes mysterious events leading to his arrest on charges of murder and arson. This throwback to the 1930s dossier mysteries, a creative job of writing and book production including evidence facsimiles (e.g., theatre ticket, vintage postcard, 1895 California newspaper, arrest ledger) and illus-

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trations with the novella-length text, proves a cleverly clued whodunit with a solution Sherlockians would find shocking if it were intended seriously. *** Philip R. Craig and William G. Tapply: *Third Strike,* Scribner, $24. Two long-standing series sleuths, Boston lawyer Brady Coyne and unofficial Martha's Vineyard private eye J.W. Jackson, join forces for the third and presumably last time, Craig having died in May 2007. Involving a ferry workers' strike, a paranoid former Red Sox pitcher, and the coming visit of an ex-President, this turns out more thriller than detective story. Repetitiousness and excessive domestic detail are redeemed by vividly captured locale, likeable characters, and exciting finale. *** Lyn Hamilton: *The Chinese Alchemist,* Berkley, $23.95. Toronto antique dealer Lara McClintoch's efforts to purchase a T'ang dynasty silver box containing a formula for immortality take her to China. If offering a little too much travelogue for some tastes, this is another solid entry in a consistently diverting series.

The 1939 novel *Satan's Murder Machines* is the first of three by prolific pulpster Norvell Page gathered in *The Spider: Robot Titans of Gotham* (Baen, $15). There is much fun to be had in the dime novelish adventures of one of those pulp-magazine crime fighters who presaged the superheroes of comic books. Joel Frieman provides an entertaining fictionalized foreword about Page. . . . The prose hero franchise lived on in paperback original novels, including the highly successful long-running series by Warren Murphy and Richard Sapir about U.S. assassin Remo Williams, three of whose early adventures are gathered in *The Best of the Destroyer* (Forge, $14.95), beginning with the 1972 novel *Chinese Puzzle,* published around the time of President Nixon's visit to China and identified as the book (third in the series) that pinned down the satirical current-events formula.

Jim Harmon, best-known as a radio historian, wrote several novels for the 1960s "sleaze" market, which emphasized story and had more in common in its sexual content (tame by today's standards) with the Spicy pulps of earlier decades than with soft-core porn of its own time. *Vixen Scandal* (Ramble House, $20), with an introduction by Richard A. Lupoff, pairs two 1961 novels, *Vixen Hollow* and *The Celluloid Scandal.* Despite the limitations imposed by market requirements and speed of production, Harmon's wildly plotted mysteries contain a surprising quotient of good prose and storytelling, with some strong scenes of action and conflict, clever turns of phrase, offhand jokes, and keen social observations. ●

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The Quarry

by Larry D. Sweazy

I suppose it is the time in my life for regret, for the secrets I have held so deep inside me to metastasize into cancer. Like my father, I'm a doctor, or was. Now I'm just a patient with IVs snaking into my arm, dripping morphine venom into my veins. I know by the smiles, by the ticks on my chart, that my time is short. And I've been thinking a lot about Teg Saidlow recently.

I know more about Teg Saidlow than I have a right to. But then again, I figure we've all seen people like Teg once or twice in our lives—I just couldn't gawk for a minute, turn away, and walk on by him. Things would've been easier, especially with Teg dead and buried for so many years now, if I would have.

A lot of people around Harlow thought Teg was just a freak of a boy who read a lot of books and had green teeth, but I thought he was a magician. For one brief summer, sticks became swords, Ivanhoe and Don Quixote quested through the woods and ravines, hills became mountains full of gold, and my imagination was born in the sound of Teg's storytelling voice. But, by the end, Teg was like a mouse trapped in a maze that didn't have any cheese in it. Every which way he turned there was just another hardwood wall. And no matter how hard I fought, I couldn't conquer the dragons that came after him.

Teg had a rough way to go from the start. He never knew his real daddy. Things got even worse when his mother married the marshal of our town when he was twelve. Now I'll tell you, it's hard to speak ill of her, but Teg's momma had a real mean streak in her. I saw her kick a cat more than once, and rumor had it that she took a shovel

Larry D. Sweazy won the WWA Spur award for Best Short Fiction in 2005, and was nominated for a Derringer award in 2007. His stories have appeared in *The Adventure of the Missing Detective: And 19 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories, Boy's Life,* and *Hardboiled,* and have been featured on Amazon Shorts. He is the owner of WordWise Publishing Services, and also works as a freelance indexer.

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to her neighbor's dog for waking her up from a nap. Bad thing was, she was a looker, had legs looked like they were carved of marble, and always wore clothes that looked more like skin than cotton. She could go from a mean middle-aged woman to a smiling schoolgirl in less than two seconds.

Teg was my best friend, really the only friend I had when I was growing up. I can almost reach out and touch Teg, smell the clean summer air, and taste my momma's homemade ice cream. I know it's the drugs and the pain, but the funny thing is, I can't tell you what I had for breakfast this morning. Life's kinda funny that way, always flipping things around, tricking your senses and tearing at your heart, promising you the past. When in truth, there's nothing but quiet darkness waiting for you at the fork in the road.

The first time I saw Teg Saidlow he was stepping off the bus with his mother in front of the Rexall drugstore. She had on a tight black skirt, high heels, and a white blouse so thin you could see the lace on her bra straps. It was the middle of July, and the woman didn't have one bead of sweat on her skin. Her luggage looked expensive, all shiny brown with stickers pasted all over the front. My father had a similar suitcase that my mother got from the S&H Green Stamp catalog. Teg, on the other hand, carried a grocery sack that looked like it was about to bust open at the seams. His pants were too short and his hair was cut all jaggedy, like someone had taken a pair of pinking shears to his bangs. I knew right then he was going to be a bull's-eye for Big Mike Bowman, the marshal's nephew, if they planned on staying around Harlow very long.

Not many new people came to Harlow, and when they did, well, the tongues got to wagging. Teg's mother's name was Loreen McCall, and that started things off right away, considering Teg's last name was different. The only thing worse than being black in Harlow was being different. I was a couple of years older than Teg when he arrived, but I was old enough to know trouble when I saw it. My mother and father didn't outwardly tolerate gossip, but there was nothing they could do to stop my sister, Pearl, and her wildfire tongue when they were out of earshot. Pearl knew everything that went on in town. Some girls collected dolls; Pearl collected stories about people and then added twists and turns of her own. I know now she was just bored. Being in Harlow was like living on a desert island to her. When she grew up, Pearl went on to be a newspaper editor in Chicago. No small feat in her day and age, let me tell you, but after all that happened in Harlow, she had a mission to tell everyone the truth. It was that way with her until the day she died, except for one thing: She never told anybody our secret about Teg Saidlow.

Teg and his momma set up house in the trailer behind Miss Molly Chad's restaurant, The Blue Moon, and it wasn't long before

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Loreen McCall was waiting tables and flipping her eyelashes at the marshal. Loreen had a way of winning people over with her soft voice and the way she'd look at you out of the corner of her eye. Like I said, the questions did arise, and the women folk weren't as taken with her as the men were. I heard my own mother whispering to Dad one night that Maggie the Cat had come to town in the form of Loreen McCall, and he'd better keep his distance. Which would have been difficult, in any case, being as he was the only doctor in the county. He said he knew how to handle stray cats and began to tickle Mother.

No one quite knew where Loreen and Teg came from, she was kind of wishy-washy on that issue, but somehow, she bewitched most people into forgetting she hadn't been born and raised in Harlow.

Teg kept a low profile right from the start. I only saw him twice before school started that year, and both times he was taking out the trash from The Blue Moon. I really didn't think too much about him that summer other than the occasional story Pearl reported to anybody who'd listen on the front porch. Most of her stories had to do with Big Mike tracking down the new boy, breaking his glasses, and setting fire to his books.

I was a gangly kid with my own problems and I was glad to be out of Big Mike's headlights. You'd think Big Mike had it out for smart kids because they were weaker and he was dumb. But that was not the case. Big Mike had a pretty good head on his shoulders when it came to schoolwork. He was tall, a center for the junior-high basketball team, but he wasn't overly muscular. I think now he was just trying to survive. He was the smartest kid to come out of the Bowman bunch in years, and being the smartest kid (along with being a decent ballplayer) meant he got to do pretty much what he wanted when he wanted. His parents had already pegged all their hopes and dreams on a fourteen-year-old boy. Big Mike wanted to make sure no one got in his way, because he was looking for a one-way ticket out of Harlow, even then.

My other problem was Pearl. She had started to court, and she was pinned for the high-school sorority, so there were slumber parties on Saturday nights and boys from the football team sniffing around all the time. Pearl and me didn't get along too well then because Mother had appointed me as her tag-along. Let me tell you, being a chaperone at any age is no fun. Pearl and her beau of the week did everything they could to ditch me, but I was like a fly on maple syrup. There was no way I was going to disappoint my mother.

About six months after they came to Harlow, Loreen McCall and the marshal, Lehigh Bowman, waltzed into the justice of the peace's office and got married. Now Lehigh wasn't the brightest

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man in the world, but he thought he was the smartest man in Harlow. Lehigh was Big Mike's uncle, and the gun on Lehigh's hip made him think he knew everything. All of the Bowmans had been marshal of Harlow at one time or another, and with Lehigh being the youngest, it was pretty much accepted he would have the job for life. The job didn't require much, and it was a good thing, because if there was one thing Lehigh Bowman didn't know anything about, it was hard work. My dad always said he envied Lehigh because he was the only man he knew who got paid for taking naps in the middle of the day.

Anyway, Lehigh and Loreen moved onto the Bowman place, a farm where most all the other Bowman brothers lived as well, into a small two-bedroom wood-frame house that hadn't been painted since the beginning of the big war. Teg was relegated to the basement. It seemed that being a step-daddy didn't set too well with Lehigh; he wanted Teg as far away as possible so he and Loreen could hump like bunnies on the living-room floor whenever the urge struck them. Teg told me later that he was really happy about living in the basement. He could sneak out the window any time he wanted and disappear into the woods behind the Bowman farm.

For weeks after the marriage, Lehigh walked around town like a big Rhode Island Red rooster, saying he'd married the "purtiest woman ever to come to Harlow." You'd've thought he'd won the Irish Sweepstakes. But it didn't take long for reality to set in, and Lehigh was back to his normal routine of naps in the afternoon and drinking beer at Store Longwood's bar on Main Street. Loreen kept working for Miss Chad, and Teg, well, that's when things started to get real bad for him.

I didn't set out to be friends with Teg Saidlow, but it happened the summer after he and his momma came to Harlow. Lord knows I had enough trouble in school on my own, fending off Big Mike too much to notice that Teg was too. As I already told you, I wasn't very athletic. My biggest muscle was on top of my shoulders. Except I didn't know that then. Oh, I liked to read, and my mother was always reciting poetry and listening to opera records she'd purchased in New York City when she was a girl, but I thought most everybody knew the things I knew.

Every Sunday morning Pearl and I woke up to Maria Callas belting out an aria I couldn't understand the words to. We knew the music was an ongoing fight between her and my dad. You see, he went to the Pentecostal church on Sundays, and Mother stayed home, refusing to step foot in a building where they kept snakes under the pulpit. She wasn't against church, really, and she understood that Dad had to fit in to Harlow because he was the only doctor, but she felt worshiping God had more to do with how people acted every day. The "little things," she used to say, "like a smile to a

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stranger, or a dime to a hobo, are worshiping too."

My dad told me after she died that he'd always agreed with her, but he felt it was his duty to go to church on Sundays, just in case one of the snakes forgot they were in a house of God and bit somebody. It happened three times before he retired, and each time, Dad saved the believer from making an early journey to Heaven.

So, it was on a Sunday morning that my friendship with Teg Saidlow really began. Mother forbade Pearl and me from practicing a heathen religion, so we were not allowed to go with Dad. Don't think we got off scot-free, though, we still had our duties to the Lord. And they came in the way of good deeds. "God didn't put people on this earth to sit on their butts on Sunday morning and listen to some madman trying to scare the bejesus out of them," she'd say. "He put them here to do something to make the world a better place." And that was that.

Because of Dad's job, Mother knew everything that went on in Harlow. She just didn't talk about it like Pearl did. Maybe somewhere along the line, she learned a lesson, as Pearl eventually would, about when to keep her mouth shut.

While she listened to Maria Callas, Mother would be in the kitchen cooking up a feast for Pearl and me to disperse to those who couldn't do for themselves. The baskets on our bikes were loaded with sweet potatoes, jars of chicken soup, leafy salads that she'd picked out of her garden that morning, tubes of salves, headache pills, and a list of names that had to be scratched off before we were allowed to come home and enjoy our own day of rest.

Sorry, I get long-winded in my memories. I miss those old days when Teg Saidlow walked the world, and my mother hummed to Maria Callas as she cut up vegetables. Things were simple, but they weren't always clean. I get so damned angry sometimes listening to people wish for the past because it was so pure and perfect, I'd like to hit them upside the head. The world was bad then, too. Teg would tell you that if he could. The world has been a mean, ugly place since Cain and Abel, and to think otherwise, well, you might as well be as dead as the past.

Now that morning, my heart sunk, because Loreen Bowman's name was on my list. The last thing I wanted to do was walk right into enemy territory. Big Mike had laid off Teg since Lehigh came into the picture. And he'd decided to make me an example to every other kid in our class who got better grades than him. After I snitched on him for copying off me in history class and told him that I wasn't ditching a test so he could be at the head of the curve, things got even more physical. I tried to trade lists with Pearl. I even offered to get lost on one of her outings, but she just laughed and sped away on her bike.

Loreen was on solid bed rest for a week. My dad had seen her the night before. The story was that she had miscarried, but even my

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father was unsure of whether that was the truth or not, even though he didn't come right out and say it. He'd seen her in his office the week before and told her that Lehigh's baby was healthy as a horse, growing in her womb just like it was supposed to. I heard him tell Mother after he came home that things didn't add up. Of course, he took it personally when some sort of tragedy took place. He should've seen it coming, prevented it, saved a life, but he didn't see this, and it hurt him badly. My dad had a weak stomach when it came to losing babies. Mother had miscarried after I was born, leaving her unable to have any more children, and it broke my dad's heart. He relived that pain and suffering every time a baby failed to take that first breath of air.

The Bowman place was about a mile north of town, hidden by a ridge of pine trees. I saved my delivery to Loreen for last. By the time I arrived, it was nearing noon, and most of the Bowmans were at the main house eating Sunday dinner. Don't get the wrong idea when I say "main house," I don't mean to imply that it was anything grand. Very simply, the Bowmans lived in a collection of ramshackle houses and rusted trailers with no wheels. There was no sign of prosperity. Those years were long past. The main house was a collection of add-on rooms on an old farmhouse that had been built by carpetbaggers and pioneers.

Lehigh's house sat at the back corner of the property, and I had to peddle past an empty barn that was guarded by a pack of yapping mutts. Mosquitoes swarmed over a green-scum pond just to the left of the house, and the stench coming from the barn was stinky enough to knock a buzzard off the fertilizer spreader.

Teg was sitting on the front stoop reading a book.

"Hey," I said.

Teg looked up from his book. He was reading *White Fang*. The jagged haircut was gone; someone had shaved his head for the summer. There's nothing worse than ticks or lice living in your hair, especially during summer, but I figured whoever had shaved Teg's hair did it more for economic reasons than for Teg's personal comfort. I had never seen Teg at the barber with Lehigh on Saturday mornings. He was still skinny as a rail, and he wore glasses that weren't quite as thick as Coke bottles but pretty doggone close.

"I got some stuff for your momma."

He closed his book and stood up. "Momma's in bed. What do you got?"

"Medicines from my dad." I wanted to drop the bag and go, just in case Big Mike showed up.

"You're Doctor Kent's boy, ain't you?"

I nodded. "Brady," I said.

"I know your name. Lehigh's people are taking care of her. You better just get on home. Momma said she don't want to see Dr. Kent anymore."

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"Well, I gotta leave this package somewhere, so I might as well leave it here and be on my way."

"Nothin' stoppin' you," Teg said. His momma coughed inside the house and I saw a shadow drift past the screen door.

I shook my head. This was the first real conversation I'd had with Teg, and it wasn't too pleasant. Normally, I would've just turned and gone on my way, but there was something there, like he wanted to say something else, but he couldn't. Now, I didn't normally make it a point to strike up a friendship with someone younger than me, but the fear in Teg's eyes made me curious and sad. I forgot all about Big Mike. Besides, what was the worst thing the crazy lunk could do? Beat me up? He'd already done that. I'd just make up another lie to my mother about the scratches and bruises I came home with. Somehow, I'd managed to keep my war with Big Mike Bowman a secret, even from Pearl, and I knew it wouldn't last forever, but right then, I didn't care. I saw a little bit of loneliness that I recognized all too well.

I set the package down beside the bike, shifted a bit, and looked around past the house to the woods. "You found the swimming hole down at the old quarry yet?" I asked.

Teg looked over his shoulder and stepped off the stoop. "Momma's gonna get real angry if you don't leave," he hissed as quietly as he could. "She starts makin' a ruckus, it's hard tellin' who'll show up."

"I was just trying to be friendly."

Teg looked at me funny, then said, "I don't need no friends, so don't be doin' me any favors."

"Well," I answered, "I'm gonna stop for a dip on my way home. I was hoping not to go by myself."

Loreen coughed again, and then appeared behind the screen. "Is everything all right, Teg-Baby?"

"Yes, Momma, it's just Dr. Kent's boy bringin' you some stuff."

"Tell him to go home."

"I already did."

I knew that was my cue to get out of there, but before I climbed up on my bike, I told Teg, nodding at the book on the porch, that if he liked Jack London then he ought to read *Treasure Island.* He said he already had.

The quarry had been deserted for years. The water was deep and clear, surrounded by fifty-foot limestone cliffs. The limestone that came from the quarry was now part of the Empire State Building in New York City. I'd seen pictures of it in Mother's photo album, and I always dreamed I would go there someday. She said I would, if I wanted to bad enough. She was right. I went to New York City for a while, touched the limestone on that tall building as if it was a monument to Teg, but somehow, I ended up back in Harlow. Funny how things come full circle, but that's another story, and

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really, I don't think I got time enough to tell it. The only important thing is that when I was old enough, I wanted to get as far away from this town as I could. But the ghosts of the past followed me every damn place I went, so in the end, I figured I might as well just come back home and look 'em in the eye.

I wasn't supposed to go to the quarry. But tell a kid he can't go somewhere and it becomes the Promised Land. Nothing you say or do can keep them away; starve them, tie them up, ground them, it doesn't matter. Mother was more understanding about my need for adventure. But my dad, well, he'd seen more than one person drown in the quarry, and the last thing he wanted was to see me in the coroner's office with a gash in my head and my belly puffed up like a dead possum on a summer day.

I didn't really expect Teg to show up, and truth be told, I didn't care if the little snot did. I was hot and tired, and a cool dip and a short nap sounded good before I headed home to my own dinner. I was just relieved that I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Big Mike. But Teg did show up. He appeared out of the woods, walking silent like an Indian might, and scared the bejesus right out of me.

"You're awful jumpy for a doctor's kid," Teg said.

"What do you know about it?" I had one leg out of my trousers, and I tumbled over on my aching butt. "Damn it." I rolled and kicked off the other leg.

Teg burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he cried and had to sit down.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothin'. Nothin'. Except you look like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* fallin' off his post. I'm sorry," he said. "I better go."

"No, don't. I mean, you can stay." I stood up, and pulled up my skivvies. "You ever swim here?"

"Nope. I was kind of scared to. It looks deep."

"It is, but here, let me show you, over here it's not so bad." I made my way through a thicket and found a path that led down to the edge of the water. There was a twenty-foot bank of sand that eased slowly into the water before it dropped off to depths unknown. I dived in, expecting Teg to follow. "Come on," I said. "The drop-off is fifteen feet out. You can see it."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. I've swam here a million times."

He nodded, took off all his clothes except his Fruit of the Looms, and jumped in.

"Feels great!" he screamed. His voice echoed off the limestone walls and he laughed.

"Yeah," I said, "it does."

I swear I heard someone in the woods that day, but I thought at the time it was a deer or a coon, even though it felt like someone was watching us.

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It's funny. One day a snot-nosed kid walks out of the woods in the summer, and the next minute he turns into your best friend. The joys of childhood, I suppose, are pretty much lost by the time you get to be an old man like me. Or taken from you. Innocence is robbed from you like a thief in the night carrying a long switchblade. But I didn't know any of that then. All I knew was that I liked being around Teg.

He'd read everything. He told me about *Don Quixote,* and *David Copperfield.* He liked the classics, but his momma would buy books from the dime store and he'd been reading a lot of books by a guy named Raymond Chandler that first summer. He used words like "dame" and "gams," and before long, much to my own mother's dismay, I was using them too.

We went to the Rivoli together on Saturdays when Teg could break away from his momma, and we'd watch Roy Rogers or Francis the Talking Mule movies. Movies played forever in Harlow, but it didn't matter, we'd go anyway. I must have seen *Francis Joins the Navy* ten times. I think I still do a pretty good imitation of Chill Wills, but I'll spare you that talent for the moment.

I never went to the Bowman place. Teg always came to my house. And my mother, well, she took him under her wing like the stray pup he was. Teg didn't talk about Lehigh or Loreen much, but when the subject came up, he got real quiet. Loreen had recovered from her miscarriage, but she didn't work for Miss Chad anymore. Lehigh thought that she should stay home and be a proper wife, which to Loreen meant sleeping till noon, making Teg do her chores, and moaning about some new sickness that had set in. It seemed the only cure for her was a whiskey bottle she kept under her mattress that she began sipping on as soon as her feet hit the floor in the afternoon.

I think my mother was thrilled that I had a friend of my own, so she didn't push much, but I could tell she was a little nervous around Teg sometimes, like she was going to say the wrong thing. Dad was always coming or going, so he didn't seem to notice Teg being around as often as he was. He readily accepted Teg's presence as if he'd always been there. But Pearl, well, Pearl was Pearl, and that meant she had her chance to be as difficult with my friend as I had been with hers.

One day Pearl was spouting a story to a circle of her friends on the porch about Lehigh Bowman getting drunk and almost running over Bobby Fuller, the high-school quarterback, with his police car. She didn't know Teg was in the house; he had been engaged in a conversation with my mother in the kitchen about the latest round of books he'd got from the library. The story Pearl was telling was all true, but she veered off the path a bit, as usual, about the time Teg came walking out onto the porch to go home.

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". . . And that's when he belted Loreen one, right square in the mouth," Pearl said.

Teg stopped directly behind Pearl. Missy Bernice sucked in her breath and motioned for Pearl to shut up. Pearl didn't notice, she just kept at it. "Then he went after Teg."

Teg couldn't take much more, so he pushed by her. Lord, I thought Pearl's legs were going to disintegrate right then and there. She stuttered and stopped, trying to apologize.

Teg would have none of it. He just kept walking until he was off the porch, and then he stopped and turned back to Pearl.

"Lehigh never hits anybody, Pearl. At least not where it can be seen by the light of day." With that, he turned and started for home.

Mother and Pearl had a big to-do after that little round of story-telling, and, well, things changed for Pearl pretty shortly after that, too. Because it wasn't much longer, a week to the day I think it was, that Teg Saidlow turned up dead.

Pearl's current beau, Tommy McVey, was fishing down at the quarry when he found Teg floating facedown. Teg was caught under some brush and the fish and turtles were already starting to nip at his flesh.

Tommy ran like lightning to our house, and Dad promptly called Lehigh Bowman. There was nothing my father could do, of course, but you could see it in his eyes, a glimmer of hope, a chance that he hadn't woken up in a world where another boy had drowned at the quarry.

I begged him to let me go.

Dad stiffened as he grabbed his black bag of wonders. "I don't want you to see that," he said.

A whisper in the form of Mother's voice drifted in from the kitchen. "Let him go, Earl. Let him see what happens when you swim at that quarry alone." She assumed Teg had gone swimming, and that it would be a good lesson for me to see.

Dad looked at me; the sheen of his face flickered deep red. The only time I saw that look was when I'd disobeyed him and was about to get a good swat on the ass. The red faded when he made eye contact with Mother, and he motioned for me to come along.

All the way out to the quarry I kept praying to Daddy's snake-taming Pentecostal God that Tommy was mistaken, that it really wasn't Teg he'd found. But when we got there, I saw my prayers weren't answered, and it was the last time in my life I ever prayed to that God for anything.

Lehigh beat us there, and he and Big Mike were pulling Teg out of the water.

"Damn it. Damn it! What the hell am I going to tell Loreen?" Lehigh yelled as he dropped Teg onto the ground.

Teg Saidlow lay lifeless on the ground, arms stretched out as if

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he was about to be fitted for a crucifix. His eyes were wide open, and he was completely dressed. I knew right then that Mother was wrong about that swim; Teg would've never swum with his clothes on. He only had two pairs of pants, and a few pairs of socks. Besides, he knew better than to walk into Lehigh Bowman's house dripping wet. Teg always swam in his underwear.

"Stay back," Dad said, just as if he were talking to a dog. I froze, watched as he scrambled to Teg's side and tried to breathe life into his mouth. He tried for more than twenty minutes to revive Teg, but to no avail.

"How long you figure he's been dead?" Lehigh asked.

"Hard to say." Dad answered. "When'd you last see him?"

"Last night. Loreen can't keep track of that boy. Sometimes she goes to get him for breakfast and he's done snuck out of his room."

"I guess he could have been here all night. You sure you didn't see him at breakfast, Lehigh?"

"Nope. Loreen was still sleeping. Neither one of them is early birds."

"What about you, Mike? When was the last time you saw Teg?"

Big Mike glared at me, shifted his weight, and looked away. "I ain't seen him for about a week."

My father nodded.

"Well, I guess he decided to go swimmin' and banged his head, huh, Doc," Lehigh said.

"Could be, but I don't see any sign of that." Dad had begun to examine Teg, running his fingers through Teg's hair, putting pressure on the skull, looking for a soft spot. "Not a drop of blood, though. I imagine the coroner's going to want an autopsy done."

"I don't want Loreen to go through that."

"Can't be helped, Lehigh, you know how these things work."

"Maybe he just drowned. Just got caught on something."

I spoke up. "Teg was a good swimmer." Dad looked at me curiously and then I sighed, nodded. I knew I had just told on myself, so I figured I might as well tell everything else I knew. "Teg wouldn't have swum with his clothes on. He never did, Dad."

"I don't know what the boy's tryin' to say, Doc, but this here is an accidental drowning and nothing more."

"Might be, Lehigh, but it might not be, either."

"I said it was an accident, and that's the way it's gonna be." Lehigh said.

In the end, Lehigh was right; Teg's death was ruled an accidental drowning. Now I figure if it would've happened in today's world, with forensics being what they are, things might've turned out differently. Old man Deeter was the coroner when he wasn't overseeing the only funeral parlor in Harlow, and when he wasn't doing that, he was playing poker in Store Longwood's basement, so he

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probably wasn't much motivated to order an autopsy. Right before the funeral, I overheard Dad tell Mother something about some bruises on Teg's back around the kidneys that didn't make sense. Dad knew it wouldn't do him any good to raise a stink, but I think he thought the same thing I did: Teg Saidlow might not have drowned all on his own.

Two things happened that day that changed everything. The first being Loreen at the funeral. She looked as if she'd woken up from a coma, like a big weight had been lifted off her. She had healed from her latest sickness, and glued on a shiny black dress to attend her only child's funeral. She almost looked high society, hat and all. Now I fully expected Loreen to play it up, throw herself on the casket like my cousin June did when her husband, Buddy, got run over by a train, but it didn't happen. I didn't see her shed a tear.

The other thing was Pearl. She comforted me, held my hand at the funeral, even gave me a hug at the cemetery and said she was sorry.

As we got in the car to go home, Pearl said, "There's something about this that's just not right, Dad. And Lehigh Bowman could care less."

I nodded.

"That'll be enough of that kind of talk, Pearl, you hear me?"

"Yes, Daddy, but . . ."

"No buts. Let the boy rest in peace."

Now Pearl and I, we put our heads together, and figured there was a murder to solve, with at least three suspects: Big Mike, Lehigh, or a madman loose at the quarry. Pearl put her nose to the grindstone and found out pretty quick that Big Mike had been hanging out at the gas station with a couple of his friends, smoking cigarettes and tinkering with an old Ford, so that pretty much ruled him out. That left the bogeyman at the quarry and Lehigh.

The bogeyman theory didn't hold a lot of mustard from the start; we'd have heard about it from somewhere else if an escaped prisoner was living in the woods, or a Gypsy had taken up residence in one of the old shacks out there. We hadn't heard anything of the like. I was suspicious of Loreen, but Pearl wore me down on that one; she just couldn't believe a mother of any kind would kill her only son.

That left Lehigh. Tracking him down was like tracking a snake in water, if he wasn't napping in his usual places.

We had just about given up until, as fate would have it, Mother came home one day all up in the air. Loreen Bowman had been getting her hair done at the same time Mother was. And Loreen had been talking about Teg, about how hard to control he'd been, how Lehigh had to threaten him just to mind. Mother told Dad that Loreen said, "If I wasn't so weak I'd a given him a good spanking

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and shaped him up, but I left that to Lehigh. Some days it's a blessing he's with the Lord now."

I had told Mother that Teg was exiled to the basement, and I think she was putting two and two together. Somebody had hit Teg too hard and then dumped his body in the quarry. Add in what Teg had said to Pearl—"Lehigh never hits anyone, at least not where it can be seen by the light of day"—and you pretty much came to the same conclusion. Somehow, Lehigh had killed Teg.

Proving it was another matter. And once again, Dad wouldn't hear of making a fuss. He told me years later that he regretted not doing so, but back then, he wasn't up to facing down the Bowmans. The whole family had a way of making it tough on someone if they put their minds to it. Big Mike had learned his bully lessons well. I never could tell Dad what Pearl and I knew, and that galls me to this day.

But we did prove Teg was murdered. At least to ourselves. Knowing the truth came with a huge price, though.

One day, about a week after the hairdresser incident, Pearl told Mother she'd heard that Loreen had taken sick again.

"Let her rot," were Mother's first words. And then she shrugged, her shoulders sagged with defeat, and finally said we'd have to make her a basket come Sunday. Mother wasn't the kind to carry a grudge, you know, but I really think she could've hated Loreen Bowman if she'd let herself.

Pearl drew the short stick this time. We figured she would. Mother had forbidden me from ever stepping foot on Bowman property or going near the quarry. But I rode out with Pearl because she helped me with my route so we'd have time to find out what we could about Lehigh.

Once we got to the road that led to the big house, I broke off, hid my bike in the woods, and made my way toward Teg's transom window. Pearl and I had the whole thing worked out. We figured if we got caught, we'd be in trouble until the time we left home, but it was worth the risk, finding out who killed Teg and bringing them to justice if the grownups weren't going to do anything about it.

What happened between Pearl and Loreen before I came into the picture was told to me by Pearl, so I'll tell you the best I can.

Pearl had to damn near push her way inside the house. Loreen was drunk. The house was a wreck, and Lehigh was nowhere to be seen. Pearl knew he was behind the post office, fast asleep.

So Pearl said, "I'm sure sorry about Teg, Mrs. Bowman."

Loreen barely answered, took the basket, and told Pearl to leave.

"Oh, I will, Mrs. Bowman. But I heard Daddy talking to another doctor the other night and they were talking about Teg. I thought you'd want to know."

Loreen dropped the basket. "What'd they say."

"Well, I didn't hear it all, but it had something to do with the

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bruises they found."

"They ought to just leave well enough alone."

"I think they said something about digging him up."

Loreen was teetering with rage. Pearl said the stench of alcohol was so thick she almost felt drunk herself.

"Get out of my house . . ." Loreen screamed.

By this time I was halfway through the transom window, and the important part of our plan was about to come into play. I slammed the transom window closed, just the way Teg used to do when he was angry.

Pearl said Loreen froze like a coon in a flashlight.

"Somebody's in here."

"I didn't hear anything," Pearl said.

"Goddamn it, somebody's in the basement." Loreen went to the door that led down into Teg's bedroom. "Who's there?"

I had crawled into Teg's bed, pulled the covers over my head. "Me, Momma. Why'd you let Lehigh kill me?" I whispered loud enough for her to hear.

"Lehigh didn't kill you! I didn't mean to hit you so hard . . ." Loreen screamed. And then she realized that Pearl was standing behind her, that she was, to all intents and purposes, talking to a ghost.

Loreen collapsed.

I swear on Pearl's grave that she reached out for Loreen, tried to catch her, tried to break the fall down the stairs, but she wasn't quick enough. Loreen flipped head-over-heels until she landed on the hard cement floor with a bone-cracking thud.

The fall didn't kill Loreen Bowman. But she was paralyzed from the neck down. Pearl lied to Dad, and to everybody, about how it happened. She never told a soul that I was in that house and we caused Loreen to fall. We never told anybody about what she said, either, that she admitted to killing Teg. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe it wasn't. Nobody'll ever know, because Loreen wasn't able to talk, either. She lived four more years, all of it in that house, in the bedroom above the basement where Teg Saidlow dreamed of slaying dragons instead of windmills.

I've lived with the guilt all my life, knowing we hurt Loreen Bowman like we did. But I hope there's some redemption in our finding out the truth, and finally telling it.

Teg Saidlow was my best friend.

I hope I get to see him when I fall asleep for the last time. ●

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Death of the Party

by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

Another faculty party. The usual supects were there:
disgruntled profs from assistant to full and the clown hired as their Chair.
He'd arrived from a distant department lit by his references' glow,
science talents touted in phrases so grand, you'd wonder why he was let go.
Unmentioned, his talent for staying lit from his very own lab beaker glass,
or the figure he cut as he staggered the halls and stumbled into his class.
Left out was his knack for mixing up files, or settling salaries on whim,
or assigning space on a hangover scale measurable ony by him.
Omitted from any reference were the female assistants he lost
through a fetish for buttocks in lab coats—or the lawsuits' ultimate cost.
Sometime in the faculty party, radioactive Polonium 210
spiked the ubiquitous beaker of booze with an ultimate Mickey Finn.
Slip or slight malice of forethought? The DA scratched his head,
wondering why the party went on with the guest of honor dead.

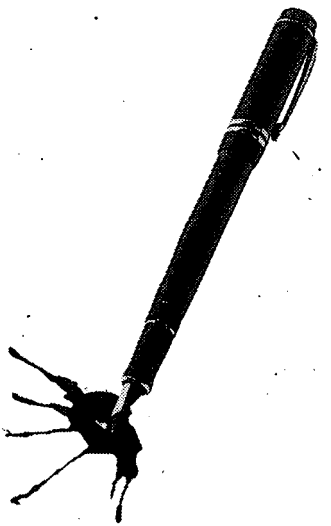
Papercuts

by Lisa Atkinson

It's dangerous here between the sheets
where the writers prey.
We sharpen quills to pay the bills
and lie without dismay.

We stab at words. Dice and splice,
prying up your every vice—
Exposing wounds in sacrifice
to entertain you well.

With pens like knives
we gouge the page,
Each of us an Ink-bleed Sage
. . . on the hunt for you.



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Art by Allen Davis

Murder of a Distressed Gentleman

by Amy Myers

"My dear sir, I am to be murdered myself. I am sure of it."

The distressed gentleman raised piteous eyes to his increasingly reluctant host. Auguste Didier, torn between this unlikely pronouncement and fear that the glories of the sole au Chablis he had just set before the gentleman might be ignored, decided to humour him.

"Could it not be," he replied gently, "that the exigencies of your profession have led you to be unduly nervous?"

The role of distressed gentleman was hardly a profession, in Auguste's view, merely a form of begging, but he had an affection for this old rogue. The distressed gentleman, clad in shabby top hat and frock coat, periodically took up his pitch in London's Strand outside Romanos, the restaurant known for its popularity with famous diners from the stage and high society. This evening, however, he had inexplicably moved across the road to stand outside

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the Galaxy Theatre, where Auguste was chef to its restaurant.

This winter of 1894, however, was a cold one, and pity for someone down on his luck had prompted Auguste to ask him inside to eat after the last of the late-night revellers had left. He felt he knew the distressed gentleman in a way. After all, Auguste had seen him at varying times and locations as a distressed soldier, veteran of Rorke's Drift; as a distressed clergyman, veteran of various vicissitudes; and as the distressed heir to a dukedom, veteran of vile villainies. In each case a small sum rapidly restored his fortunes.

Amy Myers's best-known sleuth, Auguste Didier, is back this issue on a case that pairs him with the lugubrious Inspector Rose. Ms. Myers's two most recent novels—*Murder and the Golden Goblet* (Severn House, July 2007) and *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* (Five Star, October 2007) are both entries in other series (the former Marsh and Daughter, the latter Tom Wasp). We hope to see another Didier novel soon. ✝

As distressed gentleman in the Strand, however, he offered his public something in return: a continuous patter of anecdotes about this ancient London thoroughfare, chiefly centering on the innumerable murders that appeared to have taken place here over the centuries. Stranglings, swordfights, shootings—it seemed one would be fortunate to escape the countless would-be assassins who lurked unsuspected under its bright lights.

Auguste decided to say no more about the distressed gentleman's no doubt overdramatic forecast of his own fate. Probably the wine—which Auguste could not help noticing was disappearing at a faster rate than the sole—had confused him.

The distressed gentleman, however, momentarily set down his glass and raised his mournful eyes to Auguste, as he replied with dignity, "My days on the Albion stage as an actor—" the last syllable boomed out over the empty restaurant "—have brought me into contact with many vile murders."

That, Auguste could believe. The Albion theatre was not far from the Galaxy, and had been well known for its strong dramatic taste for many years.

"But none so vile," the distressed gentleman continued briskly, "as the murders that have taken place here upon this, our noble highway. The Strand is stained with their blood. You have heard me speak of them, no doubt, Mr. Didier, in my professional capacity?"

"I have," Auguste said hastily, but there was no stopping his guest.

"Are you aware, Mr. Didier, of the evil room in the house now part of Myton's hotel? A room left locked and untouched for forty years.

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A disappointed bridegroom, abandoned by his prospective bride just moments before the wedding, locked up the bridal banquet room and forbade it to be opened ever again." The distressed gentleman spoke in hushed tones. "No doubt Mr. Dickens based Miss Havisham's chamber in *Great Expectations* upon the incident."

"I know it very well," Auguste lied firmly, in consideration of the hour, now creeping towards two A.M.

"Never to be opened again, Mr. Didier. When the hotel bought the house ten years ago, and finally penetrated the ghastly secrets of that room, what did they find?"

Auguste shuddered at the waste of such a banquet. "Rats."

"A corpse." There were tears in the distressed gentleman's eyes. "A woman's decayed body. I knew the man well in his later years at the house, little guessing what terrible secret he held in his heart."

"You're worried that he might wish to kill you?" Auguste was relieved. This was merely melodramatic patter. It was hardly likely that the perpetrator of a crime fifty years ago would fear the ramblings of a distressed gentleman, especially one who could barely have been born at the time the crime was committed.

"Who knows, Mr. Didier, the ways of a wicked heart? I have seen evils in this beloved street of ours that would shock, nay, horrify you." He looked at the sole au Chablis, took a bite, and then pushed the plate away. "No. What is food, beside such human tragedy?"

Quite a help, in Auguste's practical experience, but as he opened his mouth to speak, he lost his opportunity.

"Tragedies such as that in 'seventy-two on the corner of the Strand and Southampton Street," the gentleman swept grandly on. "Ah—would there be any cheese?" he asked hopefully.

Auguste sighed. "A little Brie?"

His guest looked doubtful. "I would prefer Stilton. A gentleman's cheese, you understand. And a glass of port, if you please."

"Certainly," Auguste said through clenched teeth, as he turned to fetch the board.

"No doubt I have related to you the murder of Miss Gabrielle Flower?"

"You have," Auguste replied snappily.

"Mistress to the Earl of Dover. 'Return to me,' quoth her former sweetheart, a clergyman, I recall." The distressed gentleman rose to his feet to do justice to the occasion, and clasped his hand to his bosom. " 'Come live with me and be my love.' 'No, no,' " he squealed in a falsetto. " 'It cannot be. My plight is trothed—' " The distressed gentleman stumbled, both physically and verbally. "I do beg your pardon, Mr. Didier. I am unaccustomed to wine. 'I have plighted my troth,' " he resumed squeakily, " 'to the Earl of Dover. I can never be yours.' 'Then I shall die,' " he informed himself, placing an imaginary pistol to his head. " 'But first you shall answer to God, oh most treacherous of women.' And then he shot her." The distressed gen-

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tleman half tumbled, half sank into his seat and took the glass of port at a gulp to revive himself.

"And he shot himself, too?" enquired Auguste.

"No. The villain ran away into the crowd that had gathered. But a few years ago I recognised him as he returned to the scene of the crime. He was a country clergyman and admitted all to me. Unfortunately that was—" he paused delicately—"while I was under a different guise, and therefore bound by the secrets of the confessional. The burden is heavy, and this week I sensed him near at hand."

"Who is he?" Auguste was torn between genuine curiosity and amusement at the seriousness with which his unobliging guest appeared to take the responsibilities of his job.

"Alas, my lips must still be sealed, Mr. Didier. I am, you must remember, a gentleman," he answered gravely. "Another, if you please." He held out his glass expectantly, but Auguste pretended not to see it, busying himself with clearing the table. He was growing very tired, especially of distressed gentlemen—*and* of distressed clergymen.

"A cigar?" the distressed gentleman enquired hopefully.

"The restaurant is locked at two A.M.," Auguste said meaningfully. "There are but ten minutes—" His protest was quelled by a mournful sigh.

"Did I tell you of the sad murder of Adolphus Bracket?" floated the distressed gentleman's voice behind him as Auguste wearily set off to fetch the best Havanas.

"Yes!" he howled. He was ignored.

"At the height of his career. I came to the Albion only days before that tragic occasion. Adolphus Bracket, that darling of the gods, strode the stage like a Colossus. Never, never shall I forget his interpretation of Eugene Aram. Dead, Mr. Didier, dead, killed by a mere envious underling, not fit to walk the same stage as he graced."

That murder, too, Auguste had heard of. Early in 1875 Bracket's body had been found stabbed in an alleyway off the Strand beside the Albion Theatre. He had been an actor universally applauded and greatly mourned. "Was the murderer ever caught?" he enquired.

"He fled the scene and the theatre. An Italian. I knew him well for I had worked with him in the provinces. Naturally, I was First Gentleman, and he merely the villain. He resented it greatly, just as he resented the great Adolphus Bracket. I would know him anywhere."

Auguste tried to clear his tired brain. "Have you seen him since?" He supposed he should at least pretend to take these ramblings seriously.

"The terror by night, Mr. Didier. It is always with me," the dis-

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tressed gentleman informed him gravely.

Auguste tried again. "You believe that one of these three murderers wishes to murder you? Which one?"

The distressed gentleman bowed his head. "This very week—but no, my calling forbids me to speak." A pause followed. "A brandy, perhaps?"

"Mr. Didier?"

Auguste looked up from his careful construction of a meringue swan. The voice was familiar, but what could have brought Inspector Egbert Rose of Scotland Yard to the Galaxy restaurant?

"A cup of warm chocolate, Inspector? An almond pastry?"

"Too rich for me, thank you." The inspector eyed the proffered plate suspiciously. "I like a nice salmagundi myself—a little bit of everything, and you can be sure what you're eating."

Nevertheless Auguste noticed a wistful look on his face, as he conducted him to a table where they could converse.

"Did you know a Montague Phelps?" Egbert Rose continued.

The name meant nothing to Auguste.

"Beggar outside Romanos. Top hat, frock coat, good line in patter—"

Light dawned. "The distressed gentleman," he exclaimed.

"Very," Egbert Rose commented drily. "He's dead. Found stabbed in the small hours near his lodgings in Henrietta Street."

Only the night before that, Auguste realised with shock, he had watched at the restaurant door as the distressed gentleman walked out into the darkness, his top-hatted figure and cane briefly silhouetted in a pool of light from a gas standard. Then he had stepped briskly out of it, and disappeared forever. Auguste was filled with remorse as he remembered his impatience to be rid of a guest who had merely outstayed his welcome.

"A random robbery?" he asked, appalled. Even as he did so, however, he recalled the distressed gentleman's "I am to be murdered myself, sir." A terrible thought struck him: Had he indeed had reason to fear for his life? Had a murderer returned, determined to silence a witness? Had he, Auguste Didier, dismissed a genuine fear as melodramatic patter?

"Perhaps," came Egbert Rose's noncommittal reply.

"But why are you here, Inspector?" Auguste frowned. Despite his help to Egbert Rose on one or two cases in the past, he was hardly a substitute for the entire Metropolitan Police detective department when it came to solving crimes.

"Your Mr. Phelps was still alive when he was found. He managed to say a few words to the constable who found him."

"And what were they?"

"The constable took them to be the name of his killer. They were: Mr. Auguste Didier." Egbert Rose's gimlet eyes fixed themselves

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firmly on him.

"You cannot believe that," Auguste stammered in shock. Surely the inspector knew him well enough not to think that he, a master chef, could be guilty of murder?

Egbert Rose relented. "Knowing you, Mr. Didier, no. But I need some explanation of why you should have been on the victim's mind."

What had earlier been a delightful meringue and Chantilly swan began to look extremely unappealing. "It was because he had dined here, not last night but the evening before. I had offered him a free dinner since it was cold outside. He told me he thought he might be murdered. I did not take him seriously," Auguste replied miserably, "as his patter was always about local murders."

"Perhaps someone did take him seriously," Egbert grunted. "Tell me what he talked about."

Auguste promptly did so, and then, for the next few days, was forced to agonise in frustration. The inspector had left to "look into it" after Auguste had faithfully recounted all the three stories to him; Egbert Rose had also informed him he would be returning. To arrest him, perhaps? Did he really think that only a day after that fateful meal Auguste would have pursued Phelps into the darkness to kill him?

Auguste felt he was in danger of becoming a Strand eccentric himself. Surely nothing could link him to this terrible crime? He would have been only fourteen when even the most recent of the murders was committed. Nevertheless, he realised it was only his word as to what Montague Phelps had claimed might be the danger facing him.

At last the inspector returned, a week after his first visit. The waiting was over, and that at least was a relief.

Not quite over, it seemed. "One of those almond pastries wouldn't go amiss, Mr. Didier."

Auguste speedily obliged and then he could wait no longer. "Did you discover anything that would help clear me, Inspector?"

"Not enough," was the far from cheering reply. "The owner of that house with the locked-up chamber, Joseph Taylor, has been dead for thirty years."

Auguste had mixed feelings. "So Montague Phelps couldn't have seen or heard of him in London recently." If this applied to all the cases, then the answer would lie between a random assailant and Mr. Auguste Didier. And he knew which would have to receive priority from Scotland Yard.

"Agreed," the inspector said drily. "But he left his house to his brother on condition that the room should still remain locked. Eventually, as Phelps told you, the hotel bought it, and lo and behold there was the skeleton of the missing bride, large crinoline and all."

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There was something odd there. Auguste did some quick arithmetic. "But the bridegroom locked the door fifty years ago, in eighteen forty-four. I'm sure there were no crinolines then."

Egbert Rose looked mildly interested. "If so, the corpse couldn't have been there when the room was locked—"

Auguste could not wait, but burst in excitedly, "No, but afterwards where better to hide a corpse than a room everyone is forbidden to enter?"

"You mean Joseph Taylor popped a second bride-to-be in there, not his first?" the inspector asked caustically.

"Or the brother could have put one in." Auguste's mind raced ahead. "His dead brother Joseph would automatically be blamed. If Joseph died about eighteen sixty-four, and his brother moved in soon afterwards, there would have been at least a few years when crinolines were still fashionable." Auguste desperately tried to remember when the crinolines had reduced in size. Surely not until late in the 'sixties?

The inspector ruminated. "Either of them could have done it in that case. I'll ask for more details, but it may be too late to get more scientific evidence now. The brother is still very much alive, although a fair age. A philanthropist, I gather."

"With or without a wife?" Auguste enquired hopefully.

"Not yet known. Now this second case, Miss Gabrielle Flower. There was another witness. Another clergyman, believe it or not. The Strand must have been crawling with them that day. That makes two real clergymen at least, plus our distressed Mr. Phelps."

Auguste clutched at an unlikely straw. "Perhaps the clergyman witness *was* the murderer?"

Rose regarded him with pity. "Would he risk staying around to get himself hanged? We've checked. He lives near Epsom now. Incidentally, there was a statement from the Earl of Dover in the file that Miss Flower had mentioned a former admirer who was a clergyman in Warwickshire where she was born and brought up."

Auguste began to think it was increasingly possible that witness and murderer were the same, but he decided not to press the point. "And the third case?"

"The late Adolphus Bracket. His widow is dead but his daughter's in London. She was only ten when her father was murdered and after that she and her mother went to the west country. I've had a word with her—she's on the stage herself and has just come back here to play at Duke's in Shaftesbury's Avenue. Well thought of. She confirmed the suspect was an Italian; his name was Giovanni Fantino, who played walk-on parts at the Albion. He was thought to have fled back to Italy, but the Italian police had no trace of him."

"He could have returned to London recently," Auguste suggested eagerly.

"We at the Yard managed to think of that for ourselves," Egbert

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Rose replied dampeningly. "And that he might not be on the stage now."

"Perhaps working in a restaurant," Auguste said undaunted. "Even Romanos, which might explain why Montague Phelps moved from his usual pitch to outside the Galaxy on Tuesday."

"With your luck, Mr. Didier, you'll have a real salmagundi here tonight. All three murderers will come marching in to supper, and you can pick out the one that suits you. I told you I like a little bit of everything."

Chuckling, Egbert Rose departed, leaving Auguste to contemplate the daunting prospect before him if he was to clear his name. A salmagundi indeed. All the ingredients were before him—but it seemed it was up to him to present the dish itself.

Mary Bracket's dressing room at the Albion was full of mementos not only of her own career but her father's as well. Auguste could see dated-looking studio photographs, playbills, even an oil painting. The late Adolphus Bracket strode over this room as a Colossus, just as he had at the Albion. He remembered once listening to the distressed gentleman in the Strand, as he imitated Bracket's portrayal of Eugene Aram, staggering theatrically as he declaimed:

"I only saw beneath my furious blows
Some writhing vermin—not a human life.
Great God! This moment I can hear his cry—"

At that moment Mary Bracket entered the dressing room. Auguste had been expecting the dramatic entrance so favoured by her father, but she proved to be a charming, graceful woman in her late twenties, with none of the imperiousness he was used to in ladies of her eminence in the profession (except at the Galaxy, of course).

"Did your mother speak about the tragedy to you?" he asked her sympathetically.

Her face grew sad. "She was so stricken with grief, Mr. Didier, that she did not live long after my father's death. She died when I was fifteen, but she had talked endlessly of his murder."

"So it was she who told you about Giovanni Fantino?"

"Yes, Mr. Didier. She was sure of his guilt," she replied quietly. "He believed my father had stood in the way of his receiving leading roles. Only he, he claimed, could effectively play Othello or Eugene Aram."

"How old would he have been then?"

"He was about twenty-five. I try hard to feel sorry for him, for he was crazed out of his mind. He killed my father on his way home from the theatre. He was seen with blood all over his clothes, so my mother was told, and he disappeared that night. My mother made investigations of her own and confirmed it before we left for Somerset."

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As he left, Auguste considered the possibility that Fantino might be working here again, buried deep in the Italian community in Southwark or east or west London. There were several such communities. Their cuisine however seemed to consist of endless strands of tasteless spaghetti or macaroni buried under tomato sauce, or else a sort of porridge made with rice called risotto. Auguste took the view that meat, fish, eggs, even cheese should live in partnership with sauces. He did not approve of their being totally dependent on them in order to be edible, and decided to postpone his investigation of Fantino until last.

The Reverend Bertrand Watkins, living in Epsom, seemed an attractive alternative, and the likelihood of his cooking spaghetti in his rural vicarage was very small. Mr. Watkins' proffered refreshment presented a far different problem, however. His cook had not yet understood that cakes should dance like soufflés and not lie like suet puddings upon the stomach. Nevertheless—and despite the chance that he was a murderer—the now elderly clergyman seemed a likeable host.

"My dear sir," he explained to Auguste, "it was many years ago, and not an incident that I care to recall. That beautiful young woman killed in her prime by a madman—and one of my own calling. A great tragedy."

The distressed gentleman had been very fond, so Auguste couldn't help remembering, of tragic young ladies. This particular crime was one of his favourite orations in the Strand; at some stage the distressed gentleman must have played in *The Duchess of Malfi*—a fairground version perhaps—for Auguste distinctly remembered a mournful "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young" concluding Phelps's dramatic rendering of Miss Flower's death.

"I believe you were the only witness who clearly saw his face?" he asked the Reverend Watkins.

"The young man ran up Southampton Street, into Covent Garden, and then St. Paul's church," came the gentle reply. "The crowd following him believed wrongly that he had then run out into the churchyard, and thence to freedom. I remained in the church, however, thinking he had sought sanctuary. I too was mistaken, but nevertheless I suddenly came face to face with him as he dashed out of a side chapel and back into Covent Garden. There he disappeared in the crowds. I gave my statement to the police and returned to my living in Lower Potwell."

"Did you ever see Mr. Phelps in London? He sometimes begged as an impoverished clergyman."

The Reverend Watkins smiled. "Alas, I am in no position to give alms to bogus clergyman when I could legitimately beg for them myself if I chose. We clergy are not well paid."

Could the Reverend Watkins really be the sweet elderly parson

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he appeared? On the journey back to London, the distressed gentleman sitting mentally at Auguste's side seemed to have no doubt. He was vigorously shaking his head.

As the train puffed into Canterbury station with a triumphant belch of steam, Auguste was looking forward to his last visit. So far he had apparently achieved little, but it was remarkable what could come of the most unlikely ingredients, and he was hopeful of his last appointment. The distressed gentleman seemed to be determined to accompany him on this journey, too, and indeed, in these circumstances, Auguste could hardly not bear him in mind. His most splendid rhetoric had frequently issued forth over the ghastly contents of the locked room and the skeleton found therein. His performance of this story had seemed to lean heavily on the well-known play of *Maria Marten and the Red Barn* for its emotions. The disappearance of poor Maria at the pitiless hands of her lover lent itself admirably to his story of the missing bride.

"Oh Heaven, deliver the murderer into the hands of justice," the distressed gentleman had so often roared with tears in his eyes for the benefit of his audience. "Show no mercy for the bloody deed. Thy father will revenge thee, child." His trembling voice was lowered for these last words.

Sir William Taylor, brother of the original owner of the mysterious locked room, lived in an elegant Georgian house on the outskirts of the city, and Auguste amused himself in its morning room studying the splendid oil paintings as he waited some considerable time for his host. He was admiring one of a seated young lady in a white dress with elegant draperies, when Sir William eventually arrived. He seemed in his late seventies, much older than the lady in the portrait, and not the most benevolent-looking philanthropist Auguste had ever seen.

"Your daughter, sir?"

"My second wife, Alice," Sir William grunted. "My first wife died abroad in the 'sixties. That's her there." He pointed to an inferior oil painting tucked away behind the door. A meek-looking lady looked somehow lost surrounded by her enormous blue crinoline, with one hand displaying an ornate wedding ring resting on the family Bible. "Now, what are you here for?" he barked. "That house in the Strand, I suppose."

"On behalf of a murdered man—"

A sharp look. "My dear sir," he interrupted, "if you are another of those ghost hunters, pray speak to the new owners. I saw no ghost while I lived there, I heard no ghost, and furthermore I have no interest whatsoever in any ghost anywhere. Clear?"

"A Mr. Montague Phelps was murdered on Tuesday night."

"Never heard of him."

"A distressed gentleman."

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Sir William looked surprised and then began to laugh. "You don't mean that scallywag who used to beg outside my door in the Strand until I saw him on his way? Tall fellow in his forties, looked like Mr. Micawber without the grin."

"It could well be."

"Why come to me? It's ten years since I sold that house."

"You heard about the corpse discovered in the room after the sale?"

He looked taken aback. "Of course. Joseph's doing. Poor fellow. Out of his mind. Brooded on his wrongs, pursued the poor woman, killed her, and put her in there. Always weird, was Joseph."

"You were never tempted to open the door when you lived there, sir?"

A furious reply to this. "I was legally bound not to, and I didn't. And about this fellow Phelps: If you're implying what I think, Mr. Didier, I give to the poor. I don't go round murdering distressed gentlemen—*or* distressed wives."

Auguste decided to leave the house, with Sir William in full agreement. Whatever he might say, Auguste concluded, he was a fit man, despite his age, and one whose jaw suggested that no one and nothing would stand in his way. Especially not distressed gentlemen.

"The portrait showed a fine wedding ring." Auguste produced a sketch he had made of it from memory on the journey home and handed it to Egbert Rose after he had completed the rest of his investigations. "Perhaps the same ring might have been found on the corpse?"

The inspector had not been pleased to hear of Auguste's endeavours and was only partly mollified by interest in what he had discovered. "I'll look into it," he grunted. "What about your hunt for the Italian?"

Auguste produced his ace. The distressed gentleman would have swept off his hat and bowed in deep appreciation at such a coup—holding out the hat, of course, for tangible recognition. Auguste was particularly proud of this coup, especially as it had involved no visits to Italian communities where he might be forced to partake of their cuisine. "There is an Italian man of middle years working in Romanos. He speaks excellent English and could well by his manner have been an actor."

"Does he answer to the name of Fantino?"

Uncertain whether this was a joke, Auguste decided to take it seriously. "No," he admitted. "But then, he wouldn't."

Egbert Rose laughed, put in a good humour again. "What about our clergyman? Any signed confessions to Gabrielle Flower's death?"

"No, but he was living at the time of the murder in the village of

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Lower Potwell. I have checked it, and it is not only in Warwickshire but next to the village where Miss Gabrielle Flower was brought up. He could easily have been the childhood sweetheart."

He waited for the inspector to congratulate him, but was disappointed.

"Are you cooking up red herrings for me, Auguste?"

"Mock turtle soup," Auguste replied automatically, flustered by the sharp note in the inspector's voice, and then realising his mistake. "My apologies, Inspector. That is on the luncheon menu."

Egbert Rose was unrelenting. "No real turtles around?"

He looked round as though expecting to see several turtles on their backs awaiting execution, Auguste thought crossly. Fifty years ago, in the days when Francatelli cooked for the queen, that might have been the case. This, however, was a different age, when his cookery instruction to "procure a fine lively turtle weighing about 120 lbs" had produced no problem at all for the enthusiastic cook. Nowadays, with the pace of the London life, kitchens were hard put to it to find the time to produce even mock turtle soup. Hardly progress. Even as this thought passed through Auguste's mind, something stirred, however. He could almost see the distressed gentleman sitting at a table as he had done that evening waiting eagerly for his dinner.

"Mock turtle soup!" he exclaimed.

"So you said. Too early in the morning, thank you."

"No, no. Perhaps the distressed gentleman was providing mock turtle soup with these three crimes."

"Not sure I follow you," Egbert Rose said cautiously

"I don't yet follow myself," Auguste admitted excitedly, "but I am tracking the turtle."

"Well done. Perhaps you'd take me with you, if you'd be so kind."

Auguste tried to do so. "Sir William Taylor is a real turtle, is he not?"

"Mr. Didier . . ." the inspector began threateningly.

"Please bear with me," Auguste pleaded. "This soup takes time to prepare. Whether or not he murdered his first wife, as I believe he did, he remains real. Phelps also could have seen and recognised him recently."

"True," Egbert Rose admitted.

Encouraged, Auguste continued. "Our clergyman, too, is a real turtle. Whether or not he was also a murderer, he was present at the crime. Phelps could also have seen and recognised him recently."

"Obviously."

Auguste hurried on. "That leaves one candidate for mock turtle. Giovanni Fantino."

"Because we haven't found him yet," the inspector whipped back crossly. "It doesn't make him *mock*. He could be that waiter at Romanos or any other of the hundreds of aging Italians in London."

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"But what if he isn't?" Auguste said.

"Dead, you mean?"

"Isn't made of real turtle. Suppose he always *was* mock, and a purée of turtle herbs was added to confuse us. Mary Bracket was a child at the time of the murder. She said her mother had told her the story. Who told the mother, though? And who told Montague Phelps? Remember that after the crime, the mother made some investigations herself and then left London with her daughter, who has only just returned here."

"So she's a mock turtle, is she?" Egbert was getting impatient. "Get to the point, Auguste. You mean Miss Bracket saw Fantino in London?"

"No. She saw the distressed gentleman. He implied but didn't *say* he'd seen the murderer he feared." In his mind's eye he could see Phelps nodding approvingly.

Egbert Rose clutched his head. "You mean Phelps was Fantino?"

"There *was* no Fantino. Did anybody at the Yard check to see if there was such an actor? Even if there was, he didn't kill Adolphus Bracket. Once begun, the myth of Fantino just grew. Actors at his level were coming and going all the time. There was no proof in fact that Adolphus Bracket had been killed by someone at the Albion. But there was a deep suspicion in the widow's mind which she passed on to her daughter. The daughter returned to London and saw Montague Phelps. The soup that had been simmering in her mind for nineteen years now boiled over."

"So who did kill Bracket?"

"The distressed gentleman, Montague Phelps," Auguste said sadly. The old rogue had been not a lovable rogue at all, but a most unlovable murderer, who had killed the man whom he believed stood in his way to advancement.

Egbert Rose looked taken aback. "So who murdered him?"

"A greatly distressed daughter, Inspector," Auguste replied reluctantly, as he had liked Mary Bracket. "Through the need for revenge on the man who had, in effect, taken both parents from her so early."

Egbert Rose thought about this carefully, and then sighed. "The trouble with you, Mr. Didier, is that you will complicate things. I come here about one murder, and you serve up the most likely solutions to four."

"A salmagundi of four turtles, Inspector," Auguste said indignantly, "and none of them is mock." ●

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Ms. Grimshank Regrets

by Nancy Pickard

My dear niece Sarah,

While I do appreciate your mother's effort to encourage you to write thank-you notes, I regret to say that your latest one was a bit of a mess. I mean this literally, not cruelly, dear. I realize you are "only" ten, but that is no excuse for sloppy work. Even a child such as yourself, with a so-called "learning disability" can surely do better than that.

Let me list the ways:

1. Wash your hands before you begin. Fingerprints, at your age, are no longer "precious."

2. The book I gave you is entitled Anne of Green Gables, *not* Ann of Green Gables. *Proofreading is next to cleanliness, my dear.*

3. You wrote that you read the book and "loved it," but a few examples of things you liked would go a long way toward proving the truth of that claim.

4. Do not ask an old woman, "How are you?" The answer is rarely, "Fine." Write, instead, "I hope this finds you well."

I hope this letter finds you willing to do better next time.

Your loving Great-Aunt,
Phyllis

P.S. Please tell your mother not to waste her budget on such fine stationery next time. You are but a young girl. Dime-store writing paper will do just fine for you.

Nancy Pickard's most recent suspense novel, *The Virgin of Small Plains,* was published to rave reviews and garnered a slew of awards, including the Reader's Choice Award, the Agatha Award, and nominations for the Edgar, Dilys, and Macavity awards. The paperback edition of the book appeared in 2007. Lately, the Kansas author has been taking time to write short stories; we've got another of her clever tales in store for later this year!

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Phyllis Shank laid down her fountain pen, folded the notepaper in half, and inserted it in its matching envelope, which she then addressed, sealed, and stamped. She had only two more mailings to prepare on this lovely, sunny Saturday morning in June, and a stack of similar notes already completed. She would have looked for-

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ward to this weekly task were it not for the sad fact that the world needed so much improvement and she had so little time to devote to it, what with her gardening and volunteer work now that she was retired from teaching. But at least now that she was no longer molding 9th-grade minds—or what passed for minds—she had this opportunity to address others who might benefit from her counsel.

Dear Mrs. Carson,

Your novel, Love's Mystery, *came highly recommended to me by a person I had long considered to be a friend. After reading only the first chapter, I now know two things that I did not know before:*

1. No one who would recommend any of your books to me could possibly know me very well. Apparently, she is not the friend I thought she was, a mistake for which I do not blame her, but only myself. You may rest assured that I have also written to her to tell her so.

2. Publishing standards have declined shockingly, which I pointed out in my letter to your publisher. It is clear that you have some talent, which makes it even sadder that you would waste it on such a tasteless story with such offensive language in it. I'm sure you do not use those words in your own life, so I cannot imagine why you would inflict them on your would-be readers.

I regret to tell you that I will never check out any of your other books from the library, nor can I in good conscience recommend them to my acquaintances.

Yours truly,
Phyllis Shank

Proofread. Fold. Insert. Address. Seal. Stamp.

From the stack of offenses she had collected from the past week, Phyllis picked up the thickest pile. It was composed of several articles from the local newspaper, each article marked up with strong red ink—grammar, punctuation, and spelling corrected, questions of fact circled, composition corrected with examples of improved style. When necessary, beside the reporter's byline she wrote in legible block letters, "AAH?" which stood for "Affirmative Action Hire?" She did not have to explain the acronym, or even pen an accompanying note for this mailing, because the editor, Marvin Frolich, could count on receiving a full packet from her every Monday. He was, by now, after several years, cognizant of her abbreviations. The source of this latest mailing would pose no mystery to him.

Phyllis sat back, satisfied with her morning's labor.

Then she gathered the creamy white envelopes into a neat stack and marched them outside to her mailbox for her post woman, Diane Stevens, to pick up. Phyllis always tried to time her arrival at the box with Ms. Stevens's arrival, so that she could let her know of any problems with previous deliveries, or remind the girl to tuck

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in her blue shirt or comb her hair. Yes, it was a hot job, and yes, it was no doubt difficult to keep one's clothing tidy while carrying a heavy bag, but that was no excuse for arriving looking as if she had dressed in her truck. She was, after all, an official representative of the United States Postal Service and the residents along her route were her employers.

Lately, they seemed to miss each other, sometimes by what seemed to Phyllis to be only seconds.

This time, Phyllis lingered longer than usual by the mailbox.

When Ms. Stevens still didn't come, Phyllis sighed, raised the flag to indicate there was mail to pick up, and returned to her house.

It seemed a mere moment later when she glanced outside and saw that the flag was down again.

On Monday, Sarah Bodine read the note from her Great-Aunt Phyllis and started to cry. When her mother, Amy, took the note from Sarah's shaking hands, she started to rage.

"I could kill her for doing that!" Amy told Sarah's dad that evening.

"How bad was it this time, and how did Sarah get hold of it?"

"You read it, you'll see how bad it is! Sarah read it because she got home before I did and picked up the mail before I could get to it first and throw the damned thing away."

"Why does your aunt do things like that?"

"Because she's a bitter, nasty old witch who doesn't have a kind bone in her body! She called Sarah's learning disability 'so-called'—"

"What? My God—"

"Yes, and she said our stationery was too good for Sarah." Amy's face, tearful by now, twisted with bitterness. "According to Aunt Phyllis, dime-store paper is good enough for Sarah." She blew her nose on the tissue her husband handed her. "Sarah and I picked out that stationery together, and we picked the best we could afford, because we agreed we wanted to show people how much we appreciate it when they give us presents."

"If there is such a thing as karma . . ." her husband said, letting the implication linger. His wife took up his sentence and finished it for him, ". . . then my Aunt Phyllis is going to die of a thousand paper cuts!"

He almost laughed at that, because it sounded so silly, but then he looked over at a photo of their ten-year-old daughter, thought of how hard reading was for her, how she struggled with spelling words and composing paragraphs, and a rage to equal his wife's came over him.

"She was a teacher!" Hal Bodine was indignant. "For how many years?"

"A hundred and fifty," Amy said with a half-sob, half-laugh.

"Would you mind if I had a word with dear Aunt Phyllis?" he asked, his tone dripping cold contempt for the woman.

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"No!" Amy exclaimed, and then she said gratefully, "I wouldn't mind at all. Somebody needs to say something."

Sybil Carson opened the creamy envelope with some trepidation.

Fan mail was such a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it could lift her spirits on a bad writing day. It could propel her back to her writing feeling as if she had magic in her fingers. Mail like that made her feel blessed and grateful to get to do what she did for a living, however small that living was these days. But it could also plunge her into black despair on days like today. She was already teetering on the edge of giving up on her latest novel, even though she couldn't afford to give up. One more hard knock might bowl her over. It wasn't as if she could easily find another line of work. For one thing, she wasn't young, and for another she didn't have any other skills. She'd been writing novels for thirty years, always thinking the next one would make enough money to let her relax a little bit. So far, that hadn't happened. People assumed writers were all rich, but she made just enough to barely hang on until she fulfilled her next book contract. And she wasn't even doing that this time. This book had been due three months earlier, but the story just wouldn't come. She had tried every writing trick she knew to fool herself into getting going again, and still nothing happened on the page that anybody would ever want to read. If she didn't meet her deadlines, she didn't get paid. If she didn't get paid, neither did her bills . . .

Please, she thought as she slowly opened the pretty envelope, please be a nice note. I just can't take any criticism right now. Nasty "fan" mail felt like a slap out of the blue, like a hand shoving out of the envelope or computer to strike her hard enough to leave marks on her psyche, if not on her face.

Sybil pulled the notepaper out and unfolded it.

Maybe I shouldn't read any fan mail right now, she thought, before looking down at the words. Maybe I shouldn't take the chance of letting it demoralize me. But then she chided herself, *Don't be a baby. Sticks and stones . . .*

Sybil read it clear through, and then laid it gently down in her lap.

Words can never hurt me?

What an abominable lie that was and always had been.

Maybe, she thought, as a sob rose in her throat, *I should write a novel about killing one of my readers . . .*

"Hey, Boss, Ms. Grimshank rides again."

Marvin Frolich's secretary tossed the weekly Monday missive onto his desktop with a grin. They had dubbed their "volunteer" editor "Ms. Grimshank" as a play on her real name, which was Phyllis Shank. Once a week, like clockwork—which she would have derided as cliché—her copies of their articles arrived, all marked

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up in blaring red ink.

"Sometimes," Marvin admitted to his secretary, "I like to imagine that all that red ink is her blood . . ."

"Boss!" His secretary laughed. "You'd never get away with it."

He sighed. "I know, but wouldn't it be nice."

What really ticked him off was that she was sometimes correct in the letter, if not the spirit, of her corrections. He had even learned a few things from her "editing." But that learning wasn't worth the price of how nasty it all seemed, and it wasn't worth the pain it caused the reporters who had seen that awful acronym, "AAH." Affirmative Action Hire? What colossal arrogance! One of the victims had been a young black reporter with budding talent, but no confidence to match. The bigoted remark had set her back months. Only last week, it had infuriated an editor who may have fit the definition of "handicapped" in terms of his paralyzed legs, but who was anything but handicapped when it came to brains and ability. Marvin had never meant for either of them to see the mailings from Ms. Grimshank, but both of them had, by accident.

"One of these days," Marvin predicted to his secretary, "our Ms. Grimshank is going to get what's coming to her."

She grinned. He didn't.

"And what is that, Boss?"

"She's going to get edited out."

When Diane Stevens didn't find the usual stack of ivory envelopes in Ms. Shank's mailbox on Monday, she sensed that something was wrong. Maybe the old biddy was out of town, but Diane doubted it, because Phyllis Shank never seemed to venture beyond her own mailbox. She even had her groceries delivered.

Probably so she can tell the boy to tuck his shirt back in, Diane thought.

"Or maybe," she muttered to herself as she stared at the small house down the short walkway, "so she can tell him that canned goods really should be double bagged, and what was he thinking to put the frozen vegetables in with the loaf of bread?"

Diane tried to get herself in hand. The old woman could be sick in there.

She went up the walk, hurrying to make up for her previous ill will. But when she reached the front door, she took the few seconds required to make sure her uniform was on straight and to pat down her hair. Not that either action would silence dear Ms. Shank. No, no, if your uniform looked good, and you'd just got your hair done, she'd still ask you if you really thought those shoes were suitable.

Diane smiled a little as she rang the bell.

It was funny, really, the way she hid from this resident so they wouldn't meet at the box. There was a conveniently placed tree, wider than Diane's own butt (which Ms. Shank had remarked

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could benefit from the exercise of the job!), where she could wait until she heard the front door close and the locks click. Then she counted to ten, ran to the box, opened it, pulled out the letters, stuck in the new stuff, and ran off to the neighbor's house before she could get caught. If the Postal Service had an Olympics for fastest mail carrier, Diane thought she might win it.

When Ms. Shank failed to answer the ring, Diane called her supervisor.

And when the neighbor lady came over to open the house for the police, they found the homeowner lying at the foot of the stairs, with strangulation marks around her scrawny neck. Red marks, red as the ink in her pen.

When informed of the identity of the victim, the chief of police—who had been receiving his own regular envelopes from Ms. Shank for years—exclaimed, "Good God, this will be the longest suspect list in history!" He didn't add what else he was thinking, "And the most sympathetic jury, too."

If they catch me, it will have been worth it.

Arnold Sullivan sat in his studio apartment and stared at the hands that had held the bitch's neck and squeezed. It had been the most satisfying few moments of his life. Again and again he reviewed in his memory how he had lunged, how she had gasped, and how she had looked as life struggled out of her.

"I have finally figured out who you are," she had said to him on Sunday.

He had put down the grocery sacks and asked politely, "Excuse me?"

She'd put a finger to her nose. "Who is that grocery delivery boy, I kept asking myself, because there was something about you that looked so familiar. And now I know. You're Sam Sullivan's older brother, aren't you?"

The grocery "boy," who was seventy years old, said simply, "Yes."

She had smiled her vicious smile, the one she used every week when she handed him a dime. One dime. As if he were ten. As if it were 1928, instead of 2008. It was also the smile his brother Sam had said she'd had on her face when she read his essay aloud in class, the one in which Sam confessed to his feelings for another boy. She had encouraged them to write passionately, tell something secret and deeply true, and she had promised nobody else would ever see it.

It had been 1957. Sam was a small boy, physically, and a naïve one socially. Arnold remembered his brother as being a sweet and innocent thirteen years old, too trusting for his own good.

Three hours later, Sam had hanged himself in the basement.

She had worn that smile at his funeral.

"You're the older brother of that gay boy, aren't you?" she'd asked him this past Sunday. "I wonder what your parents did wrong, that

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they would have one son who killed himself and another who didn't amount to a hill of . . ." She'd pointed triumphantly to the contents of one of the grocery sacks. ". . . beans."

And so he'd lunged. With these hands.

The same hands that had cut his brother down before their parents could see Sammy like that. He hoped he had left fingerprints on her neck. He thought he might like to get caught, so he could tell the world what kind of person she was. Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they'd be surprised.

Marvin Frolich read over his reporter's story about the murder of the retired teacher. They still hadn't arrested anybody, because there were just so many likely suspects, including himself. The district attorney had confided to Marv, "You know, even if we find who did this and bring him to trial, the defense attorney will have a field day proving how many other people hated her. And that's all any jury will need to acquit based on reasonable doubt."

Marvin edited the article gently, with faint pencil marks, remembering how harsh red ink could appear.

His secretary came in to take it from him.

"What did you say?" she asked, when he muttered something.

"Ding, dong," he said, with profound and unashamed pleasure. "Ding. Damn. Dong." ●

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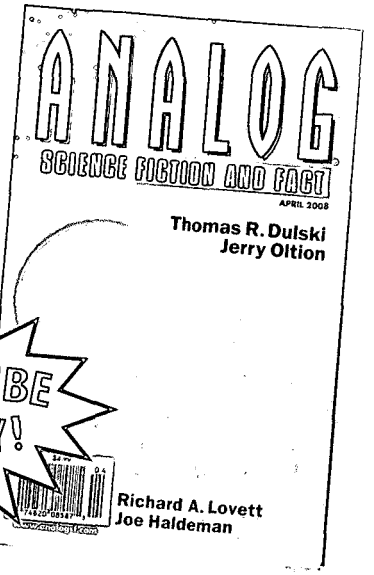

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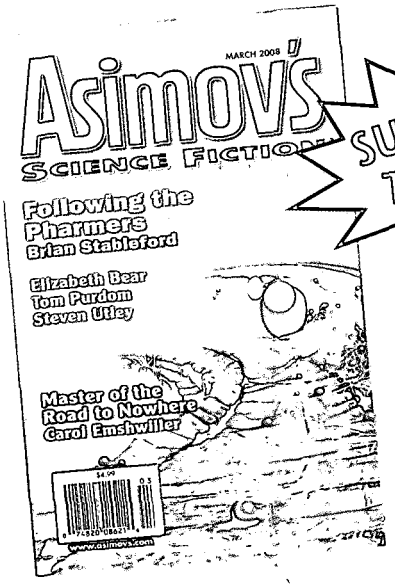

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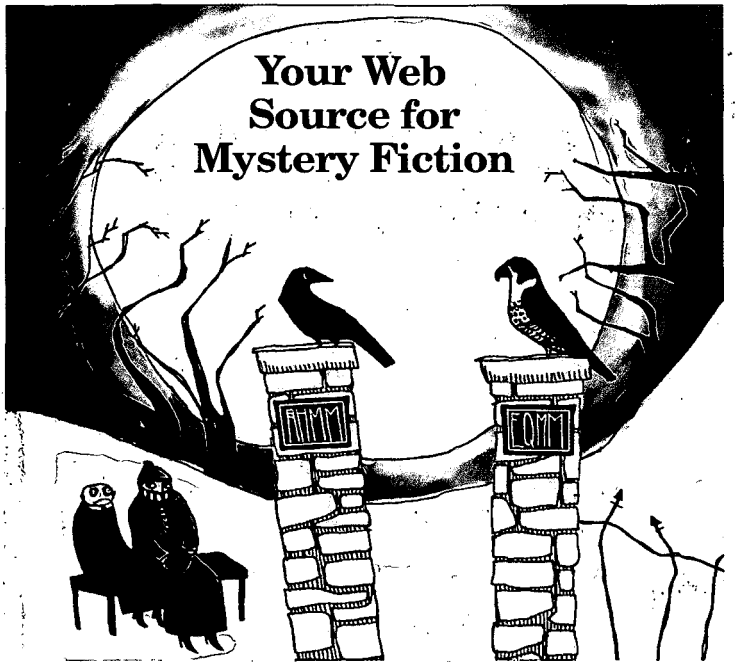

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